

THE THREE KINGS



BY
RICHARD PARKER



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THREE KNOTS

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A Mystery

BY
RICHARD PARKER
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THREE KNOTS

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CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT OF THE SIXTEENTH

“THERE is a mystery about this affair that I cannot fathom, a complete and inscrutable mystery.”

Silence followed these words. The Chief Constable, to whom the remark had been more particularly addressed, looked down for a moment, and then stared hard at the blank wall at the extreme end of the room. Again his eyes met the Coroner’s. His lips parted and he seemed about to speak, when the Coroner, not noticing this, went on:

“If anybody here,” he said in a solemn voice, “has an opinion to express, or can suggest any solution, let him, or her, do so now. Failing this, the verdict must be that this most unfortunate young woman’s death is due to strangulation, and that she has been brutally done to death by some person or persons unknown.”

He cast a questioning glance around, but still no one spoke. The only sound audible was the sobbing of Mrs. Ashcombe, the victim’s mother, and of Charlotte, her maid, whose evidence had been taken.

“Then you have nothing further to add, Mrs. Ashcombe?” he asked suddenly, focussing his gaze upon the weeping widow.

She looked up slowly and her tear-laden eyes met the Coroner's cold stare. With a shake of the head she replied, almost inaudibly:

"Nothing, I can think of nothing."

The Coroner bit his lip, and once more looked about him. Swiftly his glance passed from face to face in keen, searching scrutiny. He looked hard at the Chief Constable. The man stared boldly back. His mouth was tightly shut now. Whatever he might some moments before have contemplated saying, he no longer meant to say.

What had happened may be briefly told.

Some two-and-a-half years previously Mrs. Ashcombe and her pretty daughter, Ella, had come to live in the neighbourhood. Who they were, and whence they came, nobody exactly knew. They had bought an old picturesque cottage within a mile or two of Shadcombe, and overlooking the sea, midway between that town and Dawlish, to be precise, and close to a sleepy old-world hamlet, Holcombe by name.

Some of the residents in both places had called upon them, and all had pronounced the widow to be a charming woman, cultivated, well-read, and intelligent. Apparently, too, she had travelled, while the fact that she could read and speak several foreign tongues had impressed the local residents considerably. She seemed to be "comfortably circumstanced," as they expressed it, also a woman of exceptional refinement.

Her daughter, Ella, everybody liked exceedingly. Even the admittedly pretty girls of Shadcombe sang her praises, a thing they rarely did when a stranger, at least as good-looking as themselves, came to live in the vicinity.

"She is so utterly sweet, one can't help loving her,"

was the sort of remark heard at tea-parties in the district when her name chanced to be mentioned. True, the encomium was sometimes tempered by some such corollary as "I wonder who the Ashcombes are, and where they really come from?" or "It seems strange we know so little about either of them," but that was only to be expected under the circumstances.

Occasionally, too, conjectures would be hazarded. Somebody "had heard," or "it was said," that the widow's life had been none too happy; that her husband had "drunk secretly" before his death, and so forth.

Still, Mrs. Ashcombe and Ella's popularity had been general in the neighbourhood during the two-and-a-half years they had lived there. Then one day. . . .

It was a terrible story, that had been related in detail at the inquest.

Ella Ashcombe had, it appeared, been in the habit of bicycling over to Shadcombe early every morning, being engaged in some charitable work there, and of riding back to Holcombe in the evening. She had, whenever possible, lunched at one of the leading hotels with a young solicitor in practice in Shadcombe, Gerald Grey, at one time of the Diplomatic Service, and resident in London.

One evening, the night of the 16th of February, a very rough and windy night, with rain descending in sheets, Mrs. Ashcombe had been telegraphed for from Exeter to come at once to a dying friend who had, the message ran, expressed an earnest wish to see her again before the end. The doctor had signed the message after adding an earnest hope that Mrs. Ashcombe would come in all haste, as her friend had not long to live.

Mrs. Ashcombe had, accordingly, started out at once

for Exeter in her car, leaving Ella alone in Gareth Cottage, with their old and faithful servant, Charlotte. The cook, a recent importation from Torquay, had, unfortunately that very morning, given notice in a fit of temper, and gone home.

When, next morning, Charlotte had gone upstairs to awaken her young mistress and take her tea, she had found the door of the bedroom locked. Unable to get a reply to her repeated calling and knocking, she had, suddenly terrified, rushed out of the house, and raised the alarm.

Upon the door being forced open, Ella Ashcombe had been found lying in bed, quite dead, and the room was in great disorder. At once the police had been summoned by telephone, and then the shocking discovery had been made that the poor girl had been strangled. Round her neck a bit of string was still tied tightly, a length of tarred twine with three rather curious knots in it.

It is unnecessary to recount the searching inquiries which followed. It is enough to say that no clue of any sort could be discovered which might have helped the police in their task of finding the murderer or murderers, nor could any trace be found of the assassin in either the house itself or the grounds. By what manner he had entered the cottage it was, of course, also impossible to say, though it seemed clear that he must have entered by the bedroom window and gone out the same way.

Only, when the body was found, about seven o'clock in the morning, it was already cold, from which the police not unnaturally inferred that the crime must have been committed some hours previously.

That, condensed, was the story narrated at the

inquest. It was, the Coroner said, quite the most astonishing and baffling mystery he had ever had to deal with. Neither Mrs. Ashcombe nor her daughter were known to have an enemy in the world, and as apparently nothing had been stolen from the house, no motive for the crime could be assigned. Naturally rumours, the majority of which were of a fantastic description, had, he said, become rife in the vicinity within the past day or two, but he felt sure nobody of intelligence would pay attention to them.

Most silent of all the witnesses throughout the inquiry had been Gerald Grey, the young solicitor to whom Ella had for six months or so been engaged to be married. Gloomy, morose, almost taciturn, he had sat there with his face between his fists, his elbows on the table, apparently deep in thought. Only when addressed had he spoken, and then he had replied in monosyllables. So strange, indeed, had his bearing been, that more than once the Coroner had been unable to resist the temptation to try to draw him out.

"If you will allow me to say so, Mr. Grey" he had observed quite caustically, "this terrible affair appears to distress you less than one would have expected it to do under the circumstances. You were, I understand, betrothed to the deceased?"

"Yes," came the monosyllabic answer.

"Then do you not feel this tragedy acutely?"

"Yes."

"Yet you have no comment whatsoever to make upon it?"

"No."

The Coroner, baffled, had shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, very well," he had ended dryly. "Gentlemen, I have nothing further to say."

"But I have a word to say!" Grey had suddenly exclaimed in quite a different tone, rising abruptly from his seat. "I should like to say that in my opinion you have spoken a great deal too much throughout these proceedings, and made some most indiscreet comments."

To this gratuitous insult the Coroner had paid no heed, and soon afterwards the jury had found their verdict and risen.

As they solemnly filed out one by one into the street, a weather-beaten man of uncertain age, wearing corduroys and a frayed jersey, and smoking a short pipe, eyed them with a bovine stare.

When the last had passed him by, he spat viciously upon the pavement, and began to mutter to himself. Then he stamped away with uncertain gait, to disappear some moments later behind the swing doors of a public-house.

That evening the local police again reviewed all the facts of the case. With a certain feeling of deference, which they would not have admitted, they listened to the views expressed by the London detectives who had arrived in the town on the day the crime had been discovered. These detectives, as is their wont, immediately dismissed as "most improbable" every possible solution advanced by the local constabulary. Their own opinions, however, they kept carefully to themselves. Upon only one point were they and the "locals," as they termed them, in agreement. Whoever had committed the crime must have had some strong motive for his action.

Finally they gathered together the few shreds of evidence in an abortive attempt to piece them into one.

First, there was the length of tarred twine with the

three knots in it, with which the victim had been strangled.

Then there was the unaccounted-for jagged cut on the middle finger of the victim's left hand.

Also to be taken into account was the fact that the assassin, man or woman, had been clearly an active person, for in order to enter the window the culprit had clambered up a rain-pipe, scraping the wall-plaster on both sides of it.

And while they talked, and talked, repeating platitude after platitude, and insisting upon the accuracy of statements the obviousness of which should have been patent to all, less than a mile away a young man lay upon a bed, sobbing his heart out. At intervals he groaned aloud; but he was alone and he believed that none heard him.

Nor would any of those present at the inquest that morning have believed, had they seen him now, lying there rent with emotion and racked with grief, that this was the morose man who during the proceedings had seemingly been so indifferent and callous.

That, however, was his nature. Almost from his childhood his self-control at times when he found himself face to face with some deep sorrow, or in moments of crisis, had been remarkable. At such times he would show no sign whatever of distress. Yet when alone again and hidden from the world, he would give way completely, opening the flood-gates of his sorrow to their widest.

Gerald Grey was a man of remarkable ability, with a public school and a university education. He had put his heart and soul into the work when he had entered the Diplomatic Service, and it had been a great grief to him to be unable to remain in it. But

misfortune had overtaken him, or rather his father, a doctor by profession, but an inveterate gambler and speculator. Year after year the old man had lived in the firm hope, which amounted to a conviction, that one day he would make a big coup and thus amass at a fell swoop, if not a fortune, at any rate a sum sufficient to enable him to abandon medicine, and live out the remainder of his life in idle ease.

Of course, it had not happened. Such events rarely do, least of all when they are expected to. As he put it, he had taken a “sporting chance”; in other words he had staked two-thirds of the whole of his capital upon a venture he had been assured by “an exceptionally well-informed” friend was “bound to jump in the market.” The shares had certainly jumped, but they had jumped down. First only a little way, then they had crept down, and down, and down, until his capital had dwindled almost out of sight.

There was nothing for it but to sell his house, mortgage a little property he possessed, and cut down his son’s allowance to a minimum. This stroke of ill-luck, as the old man termed it, though in reality it was his own stroke of stupidity, his son had borne with commendable fortitude. He had not uttered a word of protest—what would have been the use when the thing was done, he said to himself. On the contrary, he had done his best to cheer his father up, and then, with an aching heart and the ambition of his life crushed, had withdrawn from the Diplomatic Service and manfully set to work to serve his articles in a West End solicitor’s office. With little difficulty he had passed the examinations, and with what money he and his father could scrape together, had set up as a solicitor in Shadcombe.

There he had soon become popular. He was capable, prompt, tactful, and invariably courteous. Most important of all, he quickly gained a reputation for absolute integrity. In addition, there was that about him which inspired confidence. By mothers with daughters to "get off" he was smiled upon. With transparent cunning they strove to ensnare him in matrimonial meshes, but he paid not the slightest heed. Their little efforts amused him. Indeed, it was not his intention to marry at any rate, until he felt the income he was earning justified his doing so. He had seen too much of "poor" marriages, he would say. No man—this was his expressed theory—had a right to marry until in a position to support a wife.

And that he would soon be in that position seemed likely as the mothers of daughters were quick to realise. His clientèle increased rapidly, somewhat to his astonishment.

Then one day he met Ella Ashcombe, and at once his theories and his views on matrimony were swept away, and with them the hopes of all mothers with marriageable daughters, except Mrs. Ashcombe. For at their first meeting he fell hopelessly in love with Ella, and made up his mind to marry her if she would accept him.

It was past midnight when he at last arose, and began to pace the room.

"My God," he cried out. "Oh Heaven, *why did I do it? Why? Why?*"

For some moments he paused, his fingers pressed upon his closed eyes. His brain throbbed. His brow felt on fire. Then, turning suddenly, he went over to his dressing-table. A framed portrait stood there.

Taking it up gently with both hands he held it to the light, the while gazing down into the eyes which looked up so steadfastly into his own.

And, on a sudden impulse, he pressed the picture to his lips.

Two servant maids sat up in their beds, staring at each other with frightened faces.

"What ought us to du about ut?" one of them said at last.

The other began to cry. She was too upset to reply.

"Us both heard un," the first speaker went on. "Awe, du stop ut, Mary. Yer'm timid as a mouse. What was ut 'e sayde? 'Heavens, why did I du ut?' Awe, 'tis awful, sure 'nuff. Us ort to inform the police. But us baint goin' tu, be us?"

The other mopped her eyes with a dirty pocket-handkerchief.

"Naw," was the only word she could manage to get out. "Naw," she repeated.

Some minutes later they blew out the candle and soon both were fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT THE ASHCOMBES

MRS. WILLIAM MONCKTON—"Mrs. Willie" as her intimates called her—was generally admitted to be the prettiest woman in Shadcombe.

Now, that is saying a good deal, for, at the time the story opens, Shadcombe was renowned far beyond the bounds of Devonshire for its pretty girls and handsome women.

"The place is crawling with 'em, bless 'em, it's crawling with 'em," a retired Colonel, member of the Shadcombe Club, had one day remarked with considerable emphasis.

And he spoke only the truth.

Mrs. Willie Monckton, however, undoubtedly topped the bill, and she succeeded in squeezing some measure of enjoyment out of life. For her husband, a rich man, never stinted her, and he liked her to dress well—which she invariably did—and to amuse herself to the best of her ability.

Shadcombe in February, in spite of its pretty women, is not the most cheerful place to live in. Some of its pleasure-loving aborigines were wont to refer to it as "a deadly dull hole," but it is hardly that. Compared with other seaside resorts of its size, its atmosphere is probably neither less exhilarating nor more depressing than that of any of them.

The principal forms of winter diversion, at the time

to which reference is made, were whist-drives and bridge-parties and tea-parties, with a little mild flirtation sandwiched in between. True, some years before there had been a distressing episode.

But that is another story. Unrefined folk indigenous to the town, still snigger when the incident is spoken of. That it proved, however, an excellent advertisement for the place the District Council will admit.

Of the tea-and-talk parties just mentioned, without a doubt the pleasantest and best-appointed were those arranged by Mrs. Willie Monckton at her "stately residence, lying and being situate," as the auctioneers and estate agents once described it, "on the slope of a steep incline upon the outskirts of the town."

The majority of these gatherings were more or less informal. At that time young men in Shadcombe were conspicuous by their absence, but Mrs. Willie Monckton made up for the lack of male admiration, which emphatically was her due, by gathering about her a *coterie* of young women and pretty girls who admired her to the point of adoration.

It was at one of these "teas" then, on a wet afternoon towards the end of March, that the Holcombe Mystery, as it had come to be called, became once more the topic of conversation.

A week after the inquest Mrs. Ashcombe had left the neighbourhood. Whither she had gone, or how long she would be away, nobody knew, nor had anybody in or about Shadcombe heard from her or anything about her since her departure. The house had been shut up and remained so. Indeed, recollection of the crime seemed gradually to be fading, when on this particular afternoon it came once more into prominence.

"I heard a curious rumour yesterday," Vera Trevor remarked inconsequently during a lull in the conversation. "It was about poor Mrs. Ashcombe."

She was quite a little girl with brown eyes and olive skin. The others called her "Zip."

"They say she won't come back here and that her cottage is to be sold."

"Oh! When did you hear that?"

"Last night. I expect she feels that to live in that house again after what has happened there, would be impossible. I can't say I am surprised."

Zip had long black lashes, and a way of looking down which displayed them very effectively. She looked down now. They were, certainly, extraordinarily long lashes. And their curve was quite unusual.

"Who told you, Vera?" Mrs. Monckton asked. She always went straight to the point. She used herself to say that she "got to the root of things."

"Well, I don't think I ought to tell you really," Vera replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"You ought not to—'really,' but all the same you will."

Again it was Mrs. Monckton:

"No, you needn't trouble to, for I am sure I know who told you. It was Mrs. Jacob Mulhall."

Vera's look betrayed the truth.

"As you have guessed," she said at last, "I suppose it can't matter if I tell you more. But mind, I don't say that what she said is true. She herself said it might possibly not be true."

"What was it anyhow?"

"Well, Mrs. Mulhall said, or rather she implied—she did not actually say so—that poor Mrs. Ashcombe is being watched."

“*Watched!*” came the exclamation in chorus. Then Mrs. Monckton inquired calmly: “Watched by whom, Vera?” “Oh, by the police, I suppose. Whom else could she be watched by?”

Mrs. Willie signalled silence. This clearly was a matter of quite exceptional importance, and as such they had a claim to it.

“Come and sit over here, Vera,” she said, pulling a comfortable chair close to her own. “Now, tell us all about it, just exactly what she said. For my part, I can’t believe there is a word of truth in this. Still, sometimes that woman’s stories”

“All right, Mrs. Willie” Vera Trevor answered.

It was a quaint conceit they had, these friends of hers, this trick of calling her “Mrs. Willie.” None could have told who had first started it, or how it had originated. Still, there it was. In a way it implied respect, and Mrs. Willie, though a delightful woman, in no way patronising and not in the least “stuck-up,” liked it.

“Now, disgorge every word,” she said, smiling. “You must tell us all you were told.”

Thus adjured, Vera began:

“I met Mrs. Mulhall in Bank Street yesterday evening, and directly she saw me she came across the street. ‘I have something so exciting to tell you, dear,’ she said—you know the way she gushes. Then she took me on to The Den, as she said she wanted to get me alone, and there went on with the story. ‘I was told it at lunch to-day by someone *well* informed,’ she said. ‘He came down from London this morning and said he had something to tell me that he knew would

interest me very much. He said it concerned poor Mrs. Ashcombe.’”

“Did she say with whom she had lunched?” a voice interrupted eagerly.

“Of course, she didn’t,” Mrs. Monckton cut in. “That would have betrayed the name of her informant. But I shall soon find out. Go on, Vera.”

“Well, it seems that this man, whoever he was, had met another man in London, and that the other man told him he had heard there were rumours that poor Mrs. Ashcombe herself could, if she wished to, throw some light on what happened on the night of poor Ella’s death”—neither Mrs. Ashcombe nor her daughter was ever spoken of now without the prefix “poor.”

“Oh, surely that must be wrong.”

“Just what I said. But Mrs. Jacob Mulhall declared her friend had said that the other man had said there couldn’t be a doubt there was something in it, and that probably we should soon——”

“Something in what?”

“Silence!” Mrs. Willie ejaculated sharply.

“Why, in the story or the rumour, about poor Mrs. Ashcombe. Mrs. Mulhall said her friend had said his friend implied that poor Mrs. Ashcombe was hiding something, something she knew which——”

“She couldn’t hide anything she didn’t know, Vera,” Mrs. Willie murmured softly, and the others laughed. “Never mind, go ahead.”

“Something she knew concerning poor Ella’s death. Then Mrs. Mulhall went on to say that her friend said, ‘Mrs. Ashcombe was being kept under *surveillance*.’”

“That means being dogged by detectives?”

“Yes, I suppose so; Mrs. Mulhall also reminded me that really none of us know much, or anything, about

the Ashcombes, or even for certain where they came from when they came here. It seems, too, that the cook she dismissed has made some statements, disclosures of some kind, since the inquest."

"To the police?"

"I suppose so. Furthermore, Mrs. Mulhall said we know nothing whatever about that friend of hers who died, or was said to have died, in Exeter, on the night of the crime. 'Doesn't it strike you as odd, Vera,' she went on, breathing right into my face, 'that Mrs. Ashcombe should suddenly have dismissed her cook with only a few hours' warning, have gone herself to Exeter, or said she went there, and left Ella and their maid, Charlotte, alone in the house like that the whole night? And I was told,' she was becoming quite excited, 'that Mrs. Ashcombe answered in a most *curious* way at the inquest, and that she appeared terribly nervous and self-conscious the whole time. Really I begin to wonder,' she added, 'whether there isn't something in this extraordinary report. If the police are watching her, you may be sure there is. I don't mind telling you, dear,' she finished off, 'that in my secret heart, I was never quite sure about poor Mrs. Ashcombe; I mean whether I liked her or whether I didn't. My first impression of her was certainly not favourable. I admit I got to like her afterwards in a way. Everyone about here did. She had a way with her.'"

"What else did she say?"

"I think that was all. I thought you would like to know. But please don't say I told you. Mrs. Jacob Mulhall said I had 'better not tell anybody—yet, as, of course, after all there *might* be nothing in it.'"

For some moments nobody spoke. All were busy thinking.

"Thank you, Vera," Mrs. Willie said at last. "The thing certainly seems queer. However, we are bound to hear more about it soon—as Mrs. Mulhall knows."

Mrs. Monckton was a tall, graceful, well-proportioned woman, with fair hair, a good complexion, which was natural to her, and grey-blue eyes full of expression. All men admired her and not a few would have fallen head over heels in love with her had they dared. Fortunately for themselves, they did not dare. Mrs. Monckton was not a prude. On the other hand she would have snubbed promiscuous love-makers in a manner they would have remembered to their dying day.

Women for the most part admired her too, but only her *coterie* waxed enthusiastic upon the subject of her allurements. The rest tempered their admiration with frivolous fault-finding. Mrs. Monckton's mouth was "too stern" to suit their taste, or she "looked too proud," or "bad-tempered," or "unsympathetic." Also, they "disliked the way she dressed her hair."

Perhaps Vera Trevor was Mrs. Willie's greatest chum. The two went everywhere together, and when Mrs. Willie had no use for her car, Vera Trevor was sure to be seen driving in it. This favouritism, however, aroused no jealousy in the breasts of the remainder of the *coterie*. Mrs. Willie was their Queen, and if she chose to single out for special honour any one of her courtiers, surely none had a right to protest?

For a little while longer Mrs. Ashcombe and the tales about her were discussed. Some pronounced Mrs. Mulhall "a cackling old cat," whatever kind of a hybrid that may be, whilst others took her part. After all, if Mrs. Ashcombe were eventually shown to be not the "nice" woman they had always considered

her, would they not have Mrs. Mulhall to thank for her acumen in first making the discovery and putting them on their guard? Certainly the new light now focused upon the widow seemed to discover in her, blemishes which might eventually prove to be flaws.

Thus the ball was started. And as it rolled it grew. Within a week it had assumed really large dimensions. Mrs. Ashcombe—"poor" Mrs. Ashcombe—was suspected of the crime. She had quarrelled with Ella—"poor" Ella—three days before, and they had "not exchanged a word from that hour. Just think, their last words to each other were words spoken in anger." It was "too terrible to think of." And so they all talked and thought about it.

And about what had they quarreled? Ah! there was some mystery there, too. The cook, since her dismissal, had been heard to say that mother and daughter had spoken about "father." It was concerning "father" that they had quarrelled.

But Mrs. Ashcombe was a widow, or supposed to be. Could it, then, be her own father they had talked about?

"No!" the cook had declared emphatically, "because with me own ears I heard pore Miss Ella say, *me* father. Aw, yew may depend upon it there be more in this 'yer than none of us do reckon on."

Then, in Exeter, it seemed—Mrs. Mulhall had found this out—the police had failed to identify the doctor who had telegraphed to Mrs. Ashcombe that her friend was dying and wished to see her.

"Who saw the telegram?" Mrs. Mulhall asked triumphantly. "Tell me that, will you? Charlotte never saw it, for I asked her this very day."

"Why, is Charlotte in the cottage still?" the friend

she was addressing exclaimed in surprise. "I thought the house was shut up."

"Ah, well my dear, there, I admit, I told you a white fib. I did not hear the statement actually from Charlotte's lips. But our gardener's wife was told so by Charlotte, and it was our gardener who told me yesterday. You are right, Gareth Cottage is shut up. Where Charlotte is I can't tell you. She went off with her mistress. Perhaps," she ended with a meaning nod, "she knew too much to be left behind."

"Then who took in the telegram?"

"Ah, *who* took in the telegram. That is what we *all* wonder."

"I suppose a wire did come?"

"That I have tried to find out at the post-office, but, would you believe it, they won't tell me. The postmaster wouldn't see me—sent out to say he was sorry he was too busy—and the girls in the post-office were rude—oh, so rude. One of them told me, to all intents, to mind my own business. As though an affair of this kind were not everybody's business! No, if a telegram came, which I doubt, it must have been taken in by Mrs. Ashcombe herself, or else by Ella. If the dismissed cook had opened the door, we should have heard long ago about the telegram. She was probably gone by then."

"But Mrs. Ashcombe had a chauffeur," Mrs. Mullah's friend, scarcely less inquisitive than herself, pursued. "Perhaps he took it in."

"Perhaps, but exceedingly unlikely, I should say. In any case we shall never know, because he, too, went away with Mrs. Ashcombe. He drove her and Charlotte to the station. That much I have discovered. I have not found out, however, to what place they

booked. Only Mrs. Ashcombe and the maid went by train. The chauffeur—his name is Tom—drove straight away from the station, and has not since been seen."

She had been talking at a great pace. Now she paused to gain breath.

"My dear," she said at last, "I agree with what the cook said. There is more in this affair than meets the eye and—why, good heavens good gracious me"

She stopped abruptly and almost choked. She was staring down the Station Road. Her eyes were fixed. Her mouth gaped.

For coming towards them along the pavement, from the station, and not twenty yards away, were Mrs. Ashcombe and—a girl, the image of Ella!

CHAPTER III

CONCERNS IRENE BAXTER

ON the rocks beneath the shadow of the great red perpendicular cliffs between Shadcombe and Dawlish a man and a woman sat, engaged in earnest conversation.

The man was tall, slim, well set-up, soldierly-looking. Wearing a loose jacket and knickerbockers, his cap beside him on the beach, he looked, as he sat there, with the rays of the setting sun touching his brown hair, the type of an Antinous.

And the girl? To describe her would be difficult. She was not pretty. On the other hand, none could have called her face plain. There was about it something quite remarkable. It might have been the wonderful intelligence in the eyes, or the eagerness in the expression as she sat listening to her companion, or it might have been some sort of strange, indefinable personality about the girl herself which at once riveted the attention of those who knew her.

Neither was she tall. Her friends—the few she possessed—used to say of her that sometimes she appeared taller than at other times. That was because of the way she carried herself, and the way some people affected her. Walking with a dull, stupid creature, whose very presence bored her, she would sometimes let her thoughts wander; and, as her thoughts wandered, so would her carriage become limp, and she

would appear to walk with a careless gait. Walking with anyone whose talk or personality interested or attracted her, she looked almost a different woman. At such times her walk would be elastic, her bearing upright, her every glance charged, as it seemed, with some peculiar nerve force individual to herself.

Irene Baxter was indeed an astounding personality. At a first sight the casual stranger would have described her, probably, as "an attractive girl but not good-looking." He would, perhaps, have set her down, had he been asked to "place" her in the social scale, as a girl in good circumstances, well-educated, well-brought-up, well-cared-for from childhood.

Certainly there was a refinement about her that is sadly lacking in many young women, apparently of her class, to be seen about to-day. She had neither a loud voice nor a loud laugh. On the contrary, though she smiled often she laughed rarely, and the *timbre* of her voice was unusual.

Yet, far from having been well-cared-for in childhood and carefully brought-up, her childhood had been unhappy. So unhappy that at the age of thirteen she had run away from her brutal father and drunken mother, who lived at that time in a tenement in Clapham, had met with a street accident, been taken to a hospital, and finally adopted by one of its directors who, having taken a fancy to her and found out all about her, had, with little difficulty, succeeded in inducing her parents to renounce all claim to her, and hand her over into his keeping.

"I don't know what to make of the child, I don't indeed," this Good Samaritan, a childless widower, had one day remarked to a friend. "Her intelligence is extraordinary. She's not much to look at, I admit,

but her intuitive faculty is amazing. She seems to read, not only my thoughts, but everybody else's. The only thing she really loves is the study of human nature."

"Make her a private detective," his friend had observed laughing.

"Strange your saying that," the old man had answered. "That is just what she has always said she means to become—a private detective."

And what in those early days she had meant to be, she had now become. Irene Baxter was not only the cleverest and most successful women detective in London, but controlling manager of a detective organisation consisting of five women and seven men, founded by herself and advertised throughout Great Britain.

"Then you think it possible?" Gerald Grey asked after a pause, during which his companion had watched his face narrowly, without knowing it.

"More than possible," she replied quietly. "Quite probable."

"But why should she have done it?"

"I can't answer that yet. I shall be able to later."

They had known each other only two days, yet each felt as though they were acquaintances of long standing.

"To tell you the truth," he said, smiling, "I had never heard of you until a week ago. Does that surprise you?"

"It does, considering the sums I spend on advertising. You mean to say that until a week ago you had never heard of Baxter's Detective Agency?"

"Never."

"Where have you been living? In a cave?"

"Down here. It's almost that. But even if I had

seen your advertisements, I don't suppose it would have occurred to me to write to you. If I had been in town I might have called to consult you; but I am rarely in town now except when business takes me there."

"I wonder who that man was who recommended me to you."

"I have no idea. As I told you, I heard him talking in the train with another man, on the way to Plymouth, about detectives—they may have been constables in plain clothes, and he spoke so highly of your agency that I chipped into the conversation, and asked if he would give me a few particulars. It was then I discovered that Baxter's Detective Agency was run by a woman—by you. 'A slip of a girl,' that's what he called you, 'a girl with a most colossal brain!'"

Irene Baxter smiled. She had one failing, as Grey had discovered. The pride she took in her organisation was inordinate. Some women love personal flattery. Irene Baxter cared not at all for flattery of that description, but open praise of her professional ability and of the detective concern she had established and raised in a few years to the high standing it then boasted, gave her intense delight.

"Oh, no," she said, "they cannot have been constables. The police never speak well either of me or my assistants. They still profess contempt for female detectives as a body. I am glad your train companion thought and spoke so well of me. I would love to know who he was. Should you recognise him if you met him again?"

"Most certainly I should. But now, tell me, Miss Baxter, what is your opinion of this twin-sister of Miss Ashcombe, who appeared upon the scene so unex-

pectedly? I confess I was dumbfounded when I saw her. Neither Mrs. Ashcombe nor her daughter had ever hinted to any one that there was another daughter. Why Miss Ashcombe never told me, I can't imagine, seeing that I was engaged to be married to her."

His companion paused. Then she said:

"It is over three months now since the crime was committed. Mrs. Ashcombe reappeared in Shadcombe on the last day of March, just six weeks after the date. During the interval nothing had been heard of her about here, and nobody had heard from her. She brought back her maid, Charlotte, with her, and, in addition, this twin-daughter, whose existence nobody about here had previously suspected. You say that though this twin-daughter exactly resembles her sister in appearance, her character appears to you to be quite different."

"Quite different."

"In what way, for instance?"

"Oh, in every way; her views and ideas and opinions are different. So is her outlook upon life. Her nature is different, entirely different."

"In short, you dislike her."

"I didn't say that."

"Ah, but you must dislike her. You loved her sister, Ella. You loved her not because of her physical beauty, because if you had you would now love her sister. You loved her, then, for the qualities she possessed. Her twin-sister has none of these attributes, you say. On the contrary, her ideas and so forth are exactly the reverse. Obviously, therefore, you must dislike her."

"Well, I don't mind admitting that I do dislike her. More than that, I mistrust her. And now I mistrust

her mother, too. Miss Baxter, my private opinion is that Mrs. Ashcombe does know something about the crime, and that she is in fear that one day she may inadvertently say something indiscreet and so compromise herself."

"Haven't you been listening to the tittle-tattle of the town? There is bound to be some gossip in a place like this. And there must have been silly rumours."

"If there have been, I know nothing of them. But then, naturally, people would talk less, or not at all, about the crime if I were present, out of consideration for my feelings. Tell me, are the police watching Mrs. Ashcombe's movements? I did hear a report, a little while ago, that the London, or the Exeter police, I forget which, had her under observation."

Irene Baxter gave a little shrug.

"Don't let that disconcert you," she said. "Police observation counts for very little. The police observe, but they don't see. You follow my meaning, don't you?"

"I think so. But now tell me what is your plan of campaign going to be?"

"I can't tell you, because I don't know. I and my people never make plans, hard and fast plans, that is—only the police do that; yet the uselessness should be obvious. In following up a case such as this is, new and entirely unlooked-for moves may have to be made at any moment, so that rule-of-thumb forecasts are really worse than harmful. I can tell you, however, what my first move is going to be."

"Yes, what?"

"Mrs. Ashcombe wants a cook. Look, here is the advertisement," and she produced from her bag a little scrap of newspaper.

"Well what of that?"

"I am going to be her cook. I have already applied by letter and sent in my credentials."

Grey stared at her in astonishment.

"But what can you cook?" he exclaimed.

The girl smiled. For the first time he noticed what a winning smile she had. It made her quite attractive.

"That you shall judge for yourself," she said quietly, looking down at the rock on which they sat, and unsticking a shell-fish from it with the point of her parasol. "One day Mrs. Ashcombe will invite you to dine."

"I think not," he answered quickly. "Mrs. Ashcombe and I are now barely on speaking terms."

"I tell you, Mr. Grey, that Mrs. Ashcombe will invite you to dine or at any rate to lunch. More, she will invite you within a fortnight from this date, and the meal served will be a meal cooked by me."

"If you get the situation," Grey said with a laugh.

"I shall get it. I never say a thing will happen unless I know it is going to happen. That you will find out, Mr. Grey, when you have known me a little longer."

The sun had now set. From far out at sea a shaft of red-and-gold shone in across the water, and seemed to touch the rocks. In silence they watched it disappear.

"What a gorgeous evening!" the girl murmured at last. "I love a night like this, don't you?"

Her expression had suddenly changed. The *timbre* of her voice, too, seemed somehow to be different. Grey glanced at her without speaking. It occurred to him,

at that moment, that he had never before met anybody quite like Irene Baxter. Did he like her or did he not? He could not say for certain.

Suddenly she turned her head.

"Who is that man in there?" she asked sharply.

"Man? Where?"

"In that little cave," and she pointed with her parasol.

"I saw nobody."

"Oh but I did. Just wait while I go and see."

"No, no, let me go."

"Stop here, Mr. Grey. I have a reason for asking you to."

She sprang quickly to her feet, and as she picked her way across the shingle, her neat figure and supple movements were not lost upon Gerald Grey.

Hardly had she entered the cave, when he heard a man's voice. The man was in the cave, too. He was addressing Irene Baxter, and she was answering him. The words were quite distinct and each word had an echo.

"I will ask you, miss, to go out of here at once," the tone was most peremptory.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort," Grey heard the girl reply.

"You won't?"

"Most certainly, I won't."

"I am afraid I shall have to make you."

"Make *me!*"

"Yes. Now get out of this at once."

"I have a friend with me, and if you touch me I shall call him."

"I don't care whom you call. I won't have you in this place. Is it Mr. Grey?"

"Yes, Mr. Grey."

"Gerald Grey?"

"Mr. Gerald Grey."

A loud laugh followed.

"Haw! Haw! Gerald Grey. *I* know Gerald Grey. Let me meet Gerald Grey. I want to meet him. I have waited to for weeks and——"

Gerald had sprung off the rock and was running towards the cave. As he entered it he looked about him.

Irene Baxter, sitting on the sand, was quietly reading a letter. She looked up at him calmly, refolded the letter and returned it to her bag, which she shut with a little snap.

"Where is he? Where is the fellow?" he exclaimed quickly.

"What fellow?"

"The man who threatened you, of course."

"There is no man in here that I can see except yourself."

He stared about the cave. It was quite a small place and nobody else was in it.

"Look, is that him over there?" she suddenly asked, pointing.

Grey turned. Instantly a man's deep voice burst into laughter behind him.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He sprang round. Irene Baxter was looking up at him.

"You!" he exclaimed.

She smiled.

"Didn't I say last night that I had a voice just like a man's, and that I should prove it to you one day?"

"Yes," he said, recovering from his surprise. "I remember now you did, but—but—"

"You had no idea"

"Certainly I *had* no idea."

"Well, now you know, Mr. Grey, so don't let anything else surprise you. I shall often surprise you I expect—that you will see as we go on."

"And now," she ended, rising, "it is time we both went home. By this time to-morrow I shall be cook to Mrs. Ashcombe, and then—"

"Yes?"

"Oh, you will see as we go on."

CHAPTER IV

FOOD FOR GOSSIP

"OUR new cook is a success, Polly," Mrs. Ashcombe remarked, as she sat at dinner with her daughter in the pretty little dining-room in Gareth Cottage. "How different from our late treasure!"

For a moment Polly did not answer. She was cracking an abnormally tough Brazil nut with her teeth, or trying to, and the nut refused to yield. Finally a compromise was arrived at, and eventually she spoke.

"Yes, but doesn't she strike you as being an odd woman, mother?"

"Odd? How?"

"Well, for one thing, she always wears gloves. I have never seen her bare hands yet."

"I doubt if they would interest you if you did. One cook's hands are probably like any other cook's."

"Possibly, but why does she wear gloves?"

"I am sure I don't know. You had better ask her. Why does a dog wag its tail? Why does a cow swallow its cud? Why does a miller wear a white cap?"

"I wish you would be serious, mother. I think it most strange that our cook should wear gloves."

"Perhaps she has ugly fingers. Anyhow I am sure I don't mind what she wears or what she doesn't wear, provided she goes on giving us dinners cooked and served as excellently as the one we have just had."

By the way, what do you think she said to me to-day, Polly?"

"Please pass the nuts, mother. You are eating all the filberts and leaving me those nasty hard Brazils. How should I know what she said to you? Asked for higher wages, I suppose."

"Nothing of the sort. She asked me if I ever had friends to dine, that she hoped I sometimes did, because she would like to show them the kind of cook I had."

"Very conceited, I call it, and rather impertinent. What business of hers is it whom you have or whom you do not have to dine? I wish she had said that to me."

"I suppose you would have snubbed her, a most foolish thing to do. Anyway, I didn't snub her. I told her we had not had any one to dine since poor Ella's death, but that I should give some little dinner-parties again soon. She quite brightened up, and said she hoped it would be very soon. In fact she became quite loquacious after that, and said she liked best cooking for gentlemen, 'not them old gentlemen as always grumbles, but gentlemen of sensible age who is epicures.' She really is something of a character, Polly."

"You are right there, mother. I only hope she is a woman of good character. You will spoil her, just as you did that awful Martha, so that you had to dismiss her at an hour's notice."

"Now, whom can we invite?" Mrs. Ashcombe said thoughtfully, ignoring her daughter's comment. "Cook suggested one or two people."

"Cook suggested. . . ! My word, mother, but that is what the French call *tout à fait trop fort*. This woman has been here about ten days, and she

starts dictating to you, telling you you ought to give dinner-parties and then begins selecting your guests. You ought not to let her talk like that. You ought not to, indeed."

"I suppose not, but there is something peculiar about that woman."

"There certainly is that."

"I mean about her manner, and her way of putting things."

"And may I ask who the guests are she considers you ought to invite?"

"Bobbie Tolhurst is one. Gerald Grey the other."

"How on earth does she know we know Bobbie Tolhurst?"

"Probably Charlotte told her. Besides, she knows Shadcombe well, she says. She has stayed here several times. She was here for a week's holiday when she saw my advertisement. Remember, in a little town like Shadcombe, everybody talks. And everybody knows everybody else's business."

Polly paused again. She was making onslaughts with her teeth upon another thick-shelled nut. It was a practice in which she indulged in the solitude of her home.

"I don't mind your asking Bobbie Tolhurst" she said at last. "He is generally amusing; but Gerald Grey does not attract me. I can't see what poor Ella saw in him, yet in her letters to me she used to rave about him. I admit he is good-looking in a way."

"His manner has been very cold lately," her mother said, thoughtfully. "But there, so has the manner of a lot of people I have met since I came back. I can't understand why it is. Now, I think it would be quite a good idea to ask Gerald to dinner, and Bobbie Tol-

hurst to keep him company. We may be able to find out then what has come over the Shadcombe people. I shall ask Gerald point-blank why his manner has changed so, when I get him to myself. He will be forced to say something."

And so it came about that both young men were invited.

Bobbie Tolhurst was a cheery lad. He had blue eyes and a merry laugh, and a word to say to everyone. Though born and reared at Shadcombe, where his father and his father's father had both dwelt before him, almost from boyhood he had been a rolling stone. He had roamed the world over. He had been everything in turn and nothing long. A finished horseman and a first-rate shot, he was also an all-round sportsman. He had studied law. He had studied engineering. He had written books on all sorts of subjects. One of them concerned his doings whilst wandering round the world with a debauched young millionaire. His career had been more chequered than exchequered, yet he had never seemed to worry. A white man through and through, his gaiety and spirits were infectious.

"I sometimes wonder," Polly said, after cracking her last nut, "how Bobbie Tolhurst makes a living. He's too honest to live by his wits, and writing is a poor profession."

"I should say he had plenty of brains," her mother suggested blandly.

"Oh, he's clever enough; but don't we know plenty of clever people who never earn a penny?"

They both laughed, as though at some thought.

"Indeed, we do. However, Polly, Bobbie Tolhurst's private life is no concern of ours. If you are so keen to know, why don't you draw him out?"

"I have tried to, but he won't be drawn. He seems fond of women's company, very fond of it. I wonder where he lives now? He rarely comes to Shadcombe."

They had spent a long day in Plymouth shopping, and were tired. After a little while Mrs. Ashcombe lay back in her arm-chair in the drawing-room, with her eyes closed.

She was still a handsome woman. Her face had hardly any lines, and there were no crowsfeet. Now, as she lay in her chair, her face at rest, she bore a marked resemblance to the famous Madame Nirvelle. There was the same broad expanse of forehead, the same semi-aquiline nose, and the firm straight mouth was singularly like hers. The chin was too pointed, a defect of which Mrs. Ashcombe herself was only too well aware. In her younger days this sharp feature had so distressed her that she had consulted two eminent surgeons, in the hope that they might be able to do something to rectify nature's error. Then she had tried massage and worn curious compress pads and bandages at night, but all to no purpose. The "tiresome feature," as she termed it, remained tiresome.

"It looks like an inverted Alp, mother" Ella had said once when she was quite a little thing. Mrs. Ashcombe had laughed and replied that she thought it was.

She had always had beautiful hair, and it was beautiful still. When she let it down at night, "gave it a holiday," as Ella used to say, it reached almost to her knees and was so thick that it covered her back like a great broad mantle. Perhaps nobody had admired it more than her own daughter. At school she had often told the other girls about it, boasting about it sometimes to such an extent that, on one occasion, the mistress had taken her aside and reprimanded her

severely, telling her it was "not modest," to talk like that in public.

"Supposing some man were to hear you talking like that about your mother's hair," she had ended by saying. "What do you suppose he would think?"

"Probably he would think he would like to see it," little Ella, then aged ten, had naïvely retorted.

For which "impertinent rejoinder" she had been put to stand in a corner.

The schoolmistress's own hair resembled a twisted wisp.

"Mother!"

Mrs. Ashcombe had been sleeping peacefully. She sat up with a start.

"Good heavens child, how you frightened me! What is the matter? What is it?"

"Just read this."

Polly was very excited. She held in her hand a copy of *The Express and Echo*, the Exeter evening paper. It had lain upon the table, unopened, until a few minutes before.

"Read it to me, whatever it is. I haven't got my glasses. You ought not to frighten me like that, Polly."

The girl patted out the paper, held it near the reading-lamp, and read the following paragraph aloud:

"THE HOLCOMBE TRAGEDY:—

"The News Association states: We have it on reliable authority that an early arrest may be expected in connection with what has come to be known as The Holcombe Mystery.

"It will be remembered that on the 16th February last, Miss Ella Ashcombe, who was living alone with her mother at Gareth Cottage, which overlooks the sea near the village of Holcombe, South Devon, was found early in the morning strangled in her bed with a piece of twine which was still tied tightly round her neck. From that day until now, no trace whatever of the murderer or murderess has been discovered, nor has any clue to the mystery been found.

"Last Tuesday some holiday makers staying at Dawlish, whilst wandering in the meadows adjoining Hole Head, noticed a small bundle lying half-hidden in the long grass at the foot of an oak-tree. It proved to contain a packet of letters, a locket with Miss Ashcombe's portrait, and a bit of tallow candle.

"Thinking that these objects might have some bearing upon the crime—the visitors admit they had trespassed for the express purpose of obtaining a view of Gareth Cottage—the finder took them at once to the Dawlish Police Station. We are now informed that the letters found contain statements likely to incriminate a well-known local resident, and that an arrest is hourly expected. "It is significant that the string tied round the bundle exactly resembled the tarred twine which was found tied round the victim's neck when the body was discovered."

As she laid down the paper, Polly turned to her mother. To her horror she was lying back unconscious, pale as death. She sprang across to her.

"Mother! Mother!" she cried, seizing her hands

and rubbing them with her own. "What is the matter? Why have you fainted?"

But Mrs. Ashcombe made no sign.

Polly rang the bell violently. Then she ran out of the room, and came back with some water. Some minutes later her mother opened her eyes.

"It is nothing, I am better," she murmured faintly. "It was only that sudden news, it brought back the past so vividly. You must forgive me, Polly. Thank you Charlotte," as the maid held some water to her lips. "I shall be better in a moment. It is nothing, nothing."

Yet it was obvious to her daughter that the shock had been very great. For a moment she wondered why. It seemed strange to her, even then, that the news should have upset her mother so terribly. After all, what was there in it? Considering all that Mrs. Ashcombe had gone through, and the wonderful way she had borne it, it was curious that news, which in reality was good news, should have made her faint like that.

Half-an-hour later she was practically herself again, and was able to talk calmly about what they had just read.

"I wonder," Polly suddenly said thoughtfully, "the police did not communicate with you when this bundle was brought to them. It would, surely, have been the natural thing to do. Is the locket that has been found one of yours, mother? And had you missed it? I thought nothing had been stolen."

"Yes, one of mine. And I did miss it at once, but I quite forgot to say so until it was too late. I was so dreadfully upset during those terrible days that I hardly knew what I was doing or saying. I was light-headed for forty-eight hours or more, you know."

"And the letters. What letters do you suppose they are?"

"I have no idea."

Suddenly a hunted look came into the woman's eyes.

"Who is it they say is likely to be arrested?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Of that there are no details," Polly answered. She picked up the paper and glanced again at the paragraph.

"'A well-known local resident?' is all it says," she said. "Who in the world can it be?"

"I cannot imagine."

For some moments both were silent.

"I think you had better go to bed now, dear," Mrs. Ashcombe said at last. "You have had a long, tiring day. And then this news on the top of it all. I have not felt so upset for a very long time."

Her tone was almost querulous.

But Polly did not at once go up to bed. She sat alone in the drawing-room, thinking, thinking. Her mother's agitation was what puzzled her. Look at it which way she would, she could not account for it at all. What was there in the paragraph that had startled her so much?

Gareth Cottage was in reality two cottages. That is to say, it had been added to by tenant after tenant, the last of whom had added also a second floor, so that the term "cottage" really hardly applied to it. And yet, in spite of these "growths," as the local builder called them, it was picturesque enough.

It was past midnight when Polly lit her bedroom candle. As she went slowly up the stairs, she thought she heard a脚步声. She stopped, listening. Yes, some one was about. It sounded on the back stairs.

She passed along the narrow little passage, and opened the door at the end of it.

She was face to face with cook.

Cook, in a becoming *peignoir*, and as stout as ever; her obesity had surprised Polly and her mother, seeing how alert the woman was, and how agile bodily. Perhaps it was her agility that surprised them, seeing how fat she was. And—why, yes, even when dressed, or undressed, like that, and at that hour of the night, she still wore gloves.

"Why, cook," Polly exclaimed sharply, "what are you roaming about the house for at this time of night?"

"I am sorry if I disturbed you, miss, I'm sure," the woman replied calmly, without an instant's hesitation. "I believe I forgot to bolt and lock the back door. I woke up a minute ago and remembered, so I am going downstairs to do it."

"You must really be less forgetful," Polly answered in the same tone. "I am surprised you should forget to lock the door in *this* house, after what happened here."

"It shall not occur again, I assure you."

"I hope it won't. Go down and fasten the door and go back to bed at once. Good-night."

"Good-night, miss."

But Polly could not sleep. She felt restless and somehow "nervy." And her pillow kept getting hot. She heard the clock strike one. Later it struck two, and still she had not slept.

Finally she struck a match, lit the candle at her bedside, and got out of bed. She must do something or other. See and speak to somebody. Was her mother awake too, she wondered?

She would go and see.

In her slippers feet she crept along the passage. Noiselessly she turned the handle of her mother's bedroom door, and pushed the door open. Shading the candle with her hand, she approached the bed. She started.

Her mother's bed was empty.

She stared all round the room. Nobody was there. The bed had been slept in, and she put her hand inside it.

It was quite cold.

Alarmed, not knowing quite what to do, she laid down her candle, and went out into the passage. In the darkness a thread of light could be seen along the floor. On tip-toe she approached it. Then she caught her breath.

The thread of light marked the door of a room with a light in it. And the room was the one in which her sister had been strangled. Since she and her mother had returned to the cottage, that room had been locked up. Nor had anybody entered it since.

Intently she listened. Her heart beat faster and faster.

Hark! What was that?

Someone was inside the room! She could hear soft footsteps, also someone breathing. There was another sound too. It sounded like gentle sawing with a very small saw.

Summoning all her courage, she turned the handle of the door and walked in.

CHAPTER V

WHO KILLED ELLA ASHCOMBE?

A HINDOO axiom says, "A man may be approached through his stomach." It sounds a disagreeable way of approaching him, but perhaps it is a short cut.

Walking along the sea wall on a beautiful evening towards the end of May, on their way to dine with Mrs. Ashcombe, Gerald Grey and Bobbie Tolhurst broached many topics in conversation. Though opposite in character, the young men had several tastes in common. Both loved travel, but whereas Tolhurst had travelled largely, Grey had only once been outside the British Isles, and then only on the Continent. Their sympathies, too, were similar, also their ideals. And both were fond of sports, though not of the same sports.

They were mid-way between Splash Point and the steep flight of steps at the end of the sea wall, which leads down to Smuggler's Lane, when, for the first time since Ella's death, Grey broached the subject of the tragedy.

"I dare say you think," he said suddenly, abruptly, "that I am gradually recovering from the shock of last February. Tolhurst, I shall never forget it—never."

"You had much better try to," his companion answered quietly. "Nobody could have felt for you more than I did; but is there any use in brooding?"

"Any use? Certainly there is. I want never to forget it until—well—until the murderer, whoever he may be, has been brought to justice."

"It seems a hopeless task, now, to try to find him, doesn't it? More than three months after it happened."

"I don't care if three months, or three years, or thirty years, go by," Grey exclaimed. "I shall go on trying to find him as long as I am alive."

"And now listen, Tolhurst," he went on more calmly. "You know I respect your judgment, and I want to ask you something. I want you to give me your frank opinion of Mrs. Ashcombe. Since she returned here our relations have been rather strained. I can't say exactly why. In fact, I should not have accepted her invitation to-night if I had not had a special reason for doing so. And I want you to tell me, too, what you think of this sudden appearance of a daughter whose existence nobody had suspected. It seems to me, and to most people living here, extraordinary that she should, while Ella was alive, never have hinted that she had another child. I feel sure that Ella must have been told to say nothing, too. Otherwise she surely would have told me."

For a minute or more Tolhurst continued to walk along in silence. When he had thrown away his cigarette and lit a fresh one, he replied by asking a question in return.

"Why in particular do you want my opinion?"

"Because, as I told you, I trust your judgment."

"Yes; but for what reason do you want it?"

"Because, if your opinion is what I believe it to be, I mean to take certain steps."

"Well, then, I will be frank with you. I don't mistrust Mrs. Ashcombe for a moment. On the contrary,

I believe her to be in every way above suspicion. Is that what you wanted to know? I believe she has, or rather had, some excellent reason for, so to speak, concealing the existence of this twin-daughter. If her husband is alive, as I imagine he is, I expect she has some equally good reason for masquerading as a widow."

"But," Tolhurst continued, "I mistrust Polly. I don't trust her in any way at all. From what I have seen of her, I believe her to be a mischief-making, designing little jade. If you like her, I can't help it. You asked for my opinion and you have got it."

"Thank you, Tolhurst, you have answered my questions just as I wanted you to. I agree with you about Polly. I don't, however, at all agree with you about Mrs. Ashcombe. The future will prove which of us is right."

They were now walking up the short, crooked hill known as Smuggler's Lane, which leads from the high road between Shadcombe and Dawlish Down to the beach and to the Sea Wall. Both were in evening clothes and wore light rainproof coats. At the top of the lane they met Mrs. Monckton and Vera Trevor.

"Ah, I can guess where you are going," Mrs. Monckton exclaimed, with one of her charming smiles. "May I have one guess?"

"Well, yes, just one," Tolhurst answered lightly.

"You are dining with Mrs. Ashcombe."

"We plead guilty to the charge."

"I am so glad. People about here are cold-shouldering her in the most abominable manner. I am glad you are not like that."

"Why should we be like that?"

"Why should anybody be? But they are. People

who shall be nameless have spread detestable rumours, and many have been believed. I met her yesterday, and she told me she had captured a new and wonderful cook."

"Then we, probably, are to be the first victims for the cook to try her hand upon," said Tolhurst.

"On the contrary, I expect you are the first asked to partake of a very excellent meal. I am glad, though, that Mrs. Ashcombe is beginning to entertain again. I am sure she needs distraction. Well, good-night, both of you, and may you both enjoy your dinner. Come and see Willie soon. You know he loves seeing you."

"Just as we love to see you, Mrs. Monckton—you and Miss Trevor. Yes, tell him we will come soon. Good-night."

"Good-night, Bobbie. Good-night, Mr. Grey."

It was noticeable that whereas everybody called Tolhurst "Bobbie," most people called Grey "Mr. Grey."

"And now I really must take you down to see our cook," Mrs. Ashcombe said after dinner. "She is quite a character—and hugely fat."

"Fat?" Grey said in surprise.

"Well, and why not? Aren't cooks often fat?"

She laughed.

"We have just had a new range put in. I told cook I would take you in to see it. Oh, and her name! What do you think it is? You will never guess. 'Minerva Brown,'"

"Great Cæsar! what a name!"

It was Tolhurst who spoke.

"I asked her if it was not rather an unusual Christian name, and she answered that her father had

'christened us all after the gods.' She said he was always reading, and that he was 'a scholard,' and that her two brothers are named 'Castor' and 'Pollux.' "

"No wonder she is a character" Grey remarked. He was thinking of what Irene Baxter had said that evening on the rocks: "I shall often surprise you, I expect—that you will see as we go on."

She surprised him again when they went into the kitchen. An obese female was seated with her back turned, reading a pamphlet. She rose and turned as the four entered and he saw before him a woman of middle age, exceedingly portly, wearing spectacles and with towslod hair almost hiding her forehead. He noticed that she wore gloves.

"Why do you always wear gloves, cook?" Polly inquired in a hostile tone, before Mrs. Ashcombe could say a word.

"I always 'ave and always shall, miss," Irene Baxter answered firmly. "May I ask if my cooking don't give satisfaction?"

"Oh, your cooking gives satisfaction. We have no fault to find with that."

"Well then, miss, if you wishes me to cook with me sweaty hands bare——"

"Please don't be so horrible, cook," Mrs. Ashcombe interrupted. "I have no objection to your wearing gloves if you prefer to, nor has Miss Polly. Now, we will come and see the new range. Is it working properly?"

But "cook" did not answer. She was holding the pamphlet close to her eyes again, and as she read, she murmured to herself:

"Married women born during this month should avoid crowds and places of amusement. They should

be particularly careful not to enter into correspondence with strangers or to——”

“What on earth are you reading there, cook?” Mrs. Ashcombe again interrupted.

Cook looked up.

“It’s ‘Every Woman’s Fortune,’ mum, I read it regular. Something wonderful the things it’s told me—it and that Madame Satanella?”

“Madame Satanella?” her mistress said in a tone of interest. “Who is Madame Satanella?”

“She is one of these clearvoyoms. Wonderful the things she knows.”

“Indeed! Where does she live?”

It was obvious even to her guests that the subject was one in which Mrs. Ashcombe was interested.

“In London, mum. In Edgware Road. I go to see her regular. What she don’t know about folks ain’t worth knowing.”

“You must tell me more about her another time. And now let us see the range.”

Grey and Tolhurst displayed polite interest in what they were shown in the kitchen. Secretly they were more interested in cook, Grey for an obvious reason, Tolhurst because the woman appealed to his sense of humour almost as keenly as her name had done. Anything less like a Minerva he had never seen.

Grey was the last to pass out of the door when what Tolhurst called the “ocular survey” was over. As he pressed his way past the obese woman with the fearsome fringe he felt something—an envelope—pushed into his hand. Their eyes met for an instant. Then he was gone.

“Strange that woman being addicted to fortunetellers,” Mrs. Ashcombe said thoughtfully, when they

were again in the drawing-room. "I have a weakness for psychologists myself, though I suppose what they tell one is mostly stuff and nonsense. Still some of them have told me some wonderfully true things."

"About your future life?" Tolhurst asked.

"Yes; but chiefly about the past, things they couldn't possibly have known."

"Such as?" Tolhurst pursued.

"Oh, I can't remember now," and she changed the subject.

Polly had been strangely silent all the evening. Her usual vivacity seemed to have entirely deserted her. Once or twice Tolhurst, who was nothing if not observant, had noticed her watching her mother with a singularly distract expression. This puzzled him a little. Could they, he wondered, have quarrelled?

They had not quarrelled, but since that night a week before, when Polly had surprised her mother at two o'clock in the morning busily engaged in rubbing with emery paper part of the parquet flooring near the window in the room where the tragedy had occurred, her mind had been busy, and a curious feeling of mistrust regarding her mother had gradually forced its way into her brain, try as she would to dispel it.

True, Mrs. Ashcombe had not appeared in the least perturbed at her sudden and presumably unexpected entry. It she was startled she had certainly concealed her astonishment in a remarkable manner, and displayed the greatest *sang froid*. From her "all fours" position on the floor, she had promptly knelt upright, and she had even forced a laugh as she said quite calmly:

"Why, Polly, I thought you were in bed and asleep long ago! Why have you come in here?"

Polly, it was, who had betrayed her feelings. It had

needed all her courage to fling open the door and bounce into the room—that awful room as she now always looked upon it—and her heart had been beating so violently that for some moments she had been unable to speak. At last, controlling herself, she had stammered out:

“I—I saw a light in this room, under the door and I—wondered who could be in here. You have frightened me terribly, mother. Do say what you are doing?”

“Why, can’t you see? Rubbing down part of the flooring that Charlotte says won’t polish. I admit it is a curious time to do it, but I couldn’t get to sleep—such a close night, isn’t it? And, of course Charlotte made up a huge fire in my room which I had to rake out. Even then I couldn’t sleep. So suddenly the thought came to me to come in here and do these boards. I have meant for a long time to do them with emery paper.”

“But why? The room is shut up always. Anyhow, Charlotte would have rubbed the floor, if it needs rubbing.”

“It was just to tire myself. I couldn’t think of any better thing.”

She stood up.

“I feel quite weary now, so I daresay I shall get to sleep. Couldn’t you sleep either?”

“No, I haven’t slept a wink.”

“There you are, you see. It’s the nasty hot night. Come, let us get to bed again and have another try.”

Polly had been thinking again during the evening of all this and other details of that night, including her meeting with cook at the head of the back stairs at the end of the passage, and she had thought of it often and often since it had occurred. She was uneasy in her

mind, had been ever since the incident of her mother's strange fainting fit and what had led to it.

"I hope you haven't found me awfully dull to-night," she said suddenly, apologetically, addressing the two guests simultaneously, as they prepared to leave. "I haven't felt well all day, I think it is this relaxing climate. It never does agree with me."

Grey expressed his regret.

"You ought to go to Dartmoor, or to Exmoor, for a little while," Tolhurst said. "You will find that bracing. The air is like a tonic."

"I was out on Dartmoor years ago," Polly answered. "We found it most depressing. Everywhere those awful-looking convicts."

Tolhurst laughed.

"Well, if you had stayed at Wormwood Scrubbs you might think Shepherd's Bush depressing," he said.

"I do think Shepherd's Bush depressing, apart from Wormwood Scrubbs. I have stayed there."

"Well, take Borstal, or any other place where criminals do congregate. Have you ever been near Borstal?"

"You seem set on sending Polly to some penitentiary or other," Grey observed grimly. "Bobbie's mind seems set on jails, Mrs. Ashcombe. He ought to be a warder or a—"

He stopped abruptly. An instant before Mrs. Ashcombe had been standing there. Now she was nowhere to be seen.

It was not until long afterwards that this incident recurred to him.

CHAPTER VI

SURPRISING DEVELOPMENTS

GREY did not open the note that Irene Baxter had slipped into his hand until alone in his little house off Landscore Road that night, after walking back with Tolhurst to Shadcombe, by way of Dawlish Road, Cross Park, New Road and Exeter Road, which was shorter than by the sea wall.

It contained only a brief message:

“A friend of mine will call to see you at eight to-morrow evening.—I. B.”

He had not seen Irene since the evening when they had parted outside the cave on the beach, between Shadcombe and Dawlish.

The note disappointed him. He was getting impatient. He wanted to know if the detective had done any good by being cook to the Ashcombes. Above all, he was anxious to know if she now suspected Mrs. Ashcombe of being in any way cognisant of anything that had happened on the night of the crime.

Punctually at eight o’clock the following evening, a ring came at his front-door bell. Some moments later, the door of what he called his “snuggery” opened and his man announced: “A gentleman to see you, sir.”

Grey had expected Miss Baxter’s friend to be a woman, but he at once rose and shook hands with the visitor.

He was rather a pale young man, not tall, with straw-coloured hair, carefully parted, combed straight back and plastered down. His weak-looking eyes were magnified by large round glasses with tortoiseshell rims, and he wore a rather loose-fitting grey lounge suit. He was very slim and held himself loosely. There was nonchalance about his manner as he grasped Grey's hand.

Grey was not prepossessed.

"Our friend, Miss Baxter, has asked me to call to see you," he said in a tone that was almost patronising. "This is a nice little place you have," he added, looking about the room after seating himself in the chair that Grey had pushed forward.

Grey stared at him.

"I am glad you think so," he replied coldly.

"Oh, but I do! Quite a nice little shop. Been here long, what?"

"Really, Mr——?" Grey waited for him to say his name, but the other continued volubly:

"I had a little shop of my own like this once," and he leered out of his weak eyes through his round glasses at Grey.

"How interesting!" his host answered icily, with an unconcealed sneer. "But I should be more interested to know what you have come here about."

"About? Oh, about nothing in particular. Irene suggested I should pop in, that is all. Said we were birds of a feather and she thought we ought to meet."

"Miss Baxter said that?"

"Sure. I and she are great pals," he leered again. "Clever girl, Irene, what? You've found that out, no doubt."

Grey began to wonder if his visitor were quite sane. If he were sane, then he was one of the most odious

people he had ever met. Two questions came uppermost in his mind. Why on earth had Miss Baxter sent this person to him, and how was he to get rid of him? He felt that if the stranger stayed long and continued to talk in this strain, he would end by pitching him out of the house or telling his man to do so. Then an idea struck him.

He pulled out his watch.

"I am dining out to-night," he said, "so I fear I must be leaving you. Which way are you going? Have you a cab, or would you like to ring one up?"

To his dismay the young man leant back in his chair and laughed.

"Going? Why, I've only just come!"

He slipped his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat.

"Don't go yet, old man," he said affably. "I'm just beginning to like you, so your dinner friends can wait. As I was saying, or going to say, Irene is a topper, a real topper. But mind, you've got to know her. She's not one of your girls who——"

"Really, Mr.——, whoever you are, your relations with Miss Baxter don't interest me in the least. I have to dine out, as I told you, so I must say good-evening. My man will show you out."

His finger was on the bell-push, when the visitor clutched his arm. At the same instant with his other hand he snatched off his horn-rimmed glasses and his wig, and his face seemed to undergo an extraordinary transformation.

Irene Baxter in a grey suit stood before him, smiling.

"Good gracious, Miss Baxter!"

He was aghast, and made no attempt to conceal his amazement.

"A new disguise," she said quietly. "I had to try it on somebody I knew, so I thought I would experiment with you. Yes, I think it will be satisfactory enough."

"Satisfactory! But your voice, your face, your entire personality, how do you change yourself like that?"

"Therein lies my success, in some measure. I said I should surprise you as I went on. You will get many more surprises if we know each other long. Now, I must put my wig on again, in case your man comes in. And for the same reason I must go on talking in the tone that I was talking in."

She had readjusted her wig and put on her horn-rimmed glasses again before he could stop her. He begged her to talk in her natural voice, but she replied that she could not run the risk.

"Think how your man would talk," she said, "if he found you had been visited by a woman in man's clothing. And I must consider my reputation.

"And now to come to business," she went on, as she sat down in the chair from which she had just risen.

"I said eight o'clock, because this is my evening out and I have to be back by ten, and before going back I have to change. Those rooms I have are most convenient for slipping in and out of. Nobody can see me when I enter or leave by the door that opens into Teign Street."

"That is fortunate, anyhow," Grey answered. He pushed his cigarettes towards her. "And now how have you got on? Have you discovered anything? Do you suspect anyone?"

"Yes—and no. I have found out several things. One is that Polly Ashcombe suspects her mother of knowing something of the crime. Another is that her mother

does know something of the crime, I believe a good deal. I don't yet say I am sure she did not herself commit it, but——”

“You don't mean to say there is a possibility of that!” Grey exclaimed. “Surely not.”

“Nothing is impossible. I could tell you of cases I have dealt with in which the culprit—but that is beside the mark. I came face to face with Polly once, in the middle of the night, just as I was about to make certain investigations. I made them another night, and they proved satisfactory. Polly herself surprised her mother, between two and three in the morning, engaged in some curious occupation in the room where the crime was committed. I have failed, as yet, to ascertain what Mrs. Ashcombe was doing, but I shall know before I give warning, I hope.”

“Then you are leaving?”

“Oh, of course. I never meant to stay there more than a week or two. I shall say the air of Devonshire disagrees with me, then I shall be able to get a reference from Mrs. Ashcombe, if on some future occasion I should need an extra one. She likes me. Polly does not. And I don't like Polly. Polly can't make me out. She is sharp, very sharp. But of course she does not suspect my identity. Oh, and I discovered this.”

She produced a bit of tallow candle, and held it up for Grey to look at.

“What is that?” Grey inquired, though he was seated quite close.

“What do you think it is, Mr. Grey?” she said with a curious smile. “What should you suppose it is? An orange? A bunch of grapes? Perhaps the smell may help you,” and she held it near his nose.

"Oh, as if I couldn't see!" he exclaimed, drawing back.

"Then why did you ask?"

"I am sure I don't know. Why do we ask many questions, the replies to which are obvious? But what of this discovery of a bit of tallow candle? I don't see what it leads to?"

"You wouldn't. Yet there was a bit of tallow candle in the bundle found by some trippers and taken to the police, you remember. Now, if this broken bit——"

"I follow you now."

"Unlooked-for acumen! Moreover, tallow candles are never used in Gareth Cottage. Charlotte told me that the mistress would never have 'them nasty things' inside the house! She declared with emphasis, when I egged her on by telling her there was a smell of tallow candle in her pantry, which of course there was not, that during all the years she had been with the Ash-combes, no tallow candle had ever been bought.

"That clinched it. It was what I wanted to find out. This bit of tallow candle, then, which I found amongst some refuse in an old coal scuttle in the outhouse in the garden—the scuttle I saw had not been emptied for many weeks—must have been brought into the house by some one, some stranger.

"What stranger? Well, my theory is that it was dropped in the room or outside the window on the night of the crime. Probably outside the window, as if left in the room, it would probably have been noticed, by the police. Charlotte, or the woman help who comes in daily, must have picked it up and tossed it into the scuttle along with other scraps when tidying up the place. It would never have occurred to either to think where it came from."

"And is that the only actual clue, or supposed clue, you have discovered while at the cottage?"

"Oh, no, there is this too."

From between her thumb and forefinger, she let drop on the little table, a tiny brass brad, a quarter of an inch long at most.

"Now, don't say—'What is it?'—again, Mr. Grey. You know as well as I do what it is. It comes out of the sole of a boot. It was lying in a bottom corner of the window sash. How did it get there? It couldn't have jumped there. Either it was dropped there accidentally, or put there intentionally. There are no children in the house, so it would not have been put there. Therefore it must have been dropped there. It dropped out of the sole of the boot of the person who entered through the window to commit the crime.

"But the deep scratches on the wall-plaster of the house, on both sides of the rain-pipe, were made by boot soles heavily shod with iron. Such boots would not have brass brads. On the other hand, a pair of Mrs. Ashcombe's thick walking-boots have brass brads, and some of the brads are missing. This brad exactly fitted the holes in her boots where the brads are missing. I know because I tried it."

Grey had been listening attentively.

All this time Irene Baxter had been talking in the assumed voice in which she had spoken at first. It was not a deep voice, not the rough, loud voice in which she had spoken in the cave, but none the less obviously a man's voice. She seemed to speak so without the slightest effort. Anyone hearing her might well have believed the voice to be her ordinary, natural one.

"By the way, have you dined?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes, I have. I dined early in order to be free when

your friend arrived," he answered, laughing. "I quite expected a woman, you know."

"I knew you would. I intended that you should. Incidentally, there is one thnig I have not told you."

"What is that?"

"Mrs. Ashcombe is partial to fortune-tellers, palmists, clairvoyants and people of that sort. I guessed that the first day I went to her, from a casual remark she made to Polly. That was why I was reading the fortune-telling book when you all came into the kitchen last night. She had told me she meant to bring you in to see the cooking-range, and of course I knew at once what she really wanted to show you was me. She rose beautifully to the bait, didn't she, when I said I knew a wonderful clairvoyante in London. This morning, as I expected she would, she got me alone and asked me all about her—'Satanella' was the name, you remember. This afternoon I heard her telling Polly that she would have to go to town on Monday 'to see those tiresome lawyers again.' She is really going up to see Satanella or she would take Polly with her. Polly is annoyed at being left behind. And Satanella, who at present does not exist, will exist on Monday, and until Mrs. Ashcombe had paid her a visit. For one of my associates will be Satanella. She has received her instructions to-day by code wire. I have rooms in several parts of London I keep always ready in case they may be needed for some such purpose as this."

Had Irene Baxter left then it would have been best for both, but neither could foresee what was so soon to happen. Irene Baxter seemed satisfied with the small discoveries she had made; Grey, on the contrary, was disappointed. He had expected her, unreasonably enough, practically to solve the mystery whilst at

Gareth Cottage, and certainly to suspect definitely some particular individual of having committed the crime. Even while talking to her he began to wonder if he had done right in employing a woman detective in preference to a man. In the police he had lost confidence long since.

Up to the present the only individual there seemed reason to suspect, was Mrs. Ashcombe herself, and even she could be suspected only of being implicated at most. Of late there had been floating rumours regarding Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur, but as he had been in Exeter with Mrs. Ashcombe on the night of the crime

But had he been in Exeter? That was a question that had passed from lip to lip. For that matter had Mrs. Ashcombe herself been in Exeter? Attempts to prove that she had received a telegram that evening had all proved abortive. There was only her word to go on. And her friend, who was supposed to have died, who was she and where had she been buried?

Nobody knew.

Neither did Grey nor Irene Baxter know anything of the little scene enacted on the night Polly had read the newspaper paragraph to her mother, for Mrs. Ashcombe had asked Polly and Charlotte to say nothing about it to anyone. Had they known, any suspicion they might have had about Mrs. Ashcombe would assuredly have been intensified.

Grey was disappointed, too, at Miss Baxter not having succeeded in discovering what part of Great Britain the Ashcombes came from, or where they had dwelt immediately before coming to settle in Devonshire. Without a doubt there was some mystery about them. Nobody knew even how long Mrs. Ashcombe had been a widow. Grey thought that the detective would

have found out all this, and much more, from Charlotte, who was known to have been in the Ashcombes' service many years. But not a bit of it. Apparently she had elicited nothing whatever from Charlotte.

They were now sitting in silence, each apparently deep in thought. Irene knew exactly, by some strange intuition, the impression Grey had just formed of her efforts at discovery, and she knew he was disappointed. Somehow this piqued her. She wished to maintain her professional reputation, but, more than that, she felt she wanted to please Grey—and not merely because he employed her.

Why, then?

She asked herself this question, and could not answer it. Did she like Grey? Yes, she liked him. She thought she liked him very much. For an instant she wondered if she did not like him better than any man she had as yet met, so far as she could remember.

"Oh, what nonsense!" she suddenly exclaimed mentally. "If I let thoughts like that get the better of me, I shall presently be growing sentimental."

For she was one of those young women, they are more numerous than is commonly supposed, who profess to sneer at sentiment and all approaching it, and mean to live only for their ambitions.

She glanced across at him as she sat with his chin resting upon his hand, his elbow on his knee—a characteristic attitude. He truly was good-looking, very good-looking indeed. Not in the commonly accepted meaning of the words, so much as in the strength of character that marked his features and his expression. His features were not regular. He had not a classic profile, or wonderful eyes, or arched brows, or a Grecian nose, or a well-shaped chin. He had a firm chin, a

straight mouth, with a curious little "lift" at the corners, clear, sun-tanned skin, and very white teeth. His eyes were almost steel grey and full of intelligence, with long dark lashes. His brown hair had a kink behind the ears, which somehow she liked.

She was about to speak, to say she really must be leaving as she must be in by ten, when she heard the door-bell ring.

Grey looked up quickly.

"Who can that be, I wonder," he said. "I never have visitors at this time."

Some moments later they heard voices in the hall. Two men were talking to Jobbins, Grey's manservant. He seemed to be protesting. They remained insistent.

Grey rose, and opened the door of his room.

"Who is that, Jobbins?" he called out.

"They want to see you, please, sir."

"Well, show them in, whoever they are!"

Reluctantly Jobbins led the way. Two constables in uniform entered the room. They came from the Shadcombe Constabulary, and both were known to Grey.

"We should prefer to see you alone, sir," one of them said in an embarrassed tone. "The matter we have to see you about is private."

"You can go, Jobbins," said Grey.

When the door was shut he added, addressing the constable and indicating Irene Baxter:

"You can speak before this gentleman."

"We would sooner not, sir."

"I tell you you may. Now what is it?"

"Well, sir, as you say so I suppose we must."

He produced a blue document.

"I have here, sir, a warrant of arrest."

"Arrest? Whose arrest?"

"Your arrest, sir."

"*My* arrest! What do you mean?"

"I will read it to you, sir," and he proceeded to do so.

For a moment, Grey did not speak. Then he said calmly:

"I will come with you. Will you have anything before we leave, either of you?" and he indicated the tantalus.

He turned to his guest.

"You have heard the warrant read," he said. "What do you make of it at all?"

"I am only surprised," she announced in a curious tone, not loud enough for the police to hear, "I am only surprised it has been so long coming."

CHAPTER VII

THROUGH THE MISTS

IRENE BAXTER accompanied Grey to the Police Station. Since his arrest she had not spoken, and he felt puzzled to account for her silence. Also her curt answer, that she was surprised he had not been arrested sooner, had amazed him.

Could she suspect him? It seemed impossible. If so, then she must be the most accomplished hypocrite he had ever met. It seemed hardly credible, too, that while engaged by him to try to discover Ella Ashcombe's murderer she should all the time have been suspecting him of being implicated in the crime.

At the Police Station she was asked her name and address. She produced from her bag a letter addressed to "Walter Shedbeau" at an address in London, and they copied the name and address. She said she had come down from London that day, and was returning to town by the night mail.

Then she turned abruptly to Grey.

"Good-night, Mr. Grey," she said, extending her hand. "You know where to find me if you want me."

"Good-night, and thank you for coming with me. Of course, the charge is ridiculous. I shall clear myself at once."

"I hope so," she answered, again in the tone in which

she had said, "I am only surprised it has been so long coming."

He opened his lips as if about to speak again; then thought better of it and remained silent.

Next day but one the provincial journals reported his arrest in big headlines. And again, fickle as ever, the people of the town and district chatteringly agreed that "there must be something in it."

Meanwhile, in a first-floor room of a house in Edgware Road, a fearsome-looking woman, arrayed as a "mystic," sat awaiting the arrival of a client.

She expected only one client, and that client had not made an appointment. But she knew she would arrive in London from Devonshire early in the afternoon, and therefore guessed that she would come to see her before nightfall. Nor was she mistaken. At twenty minutes past five a knock came at the outer door on the landing.

Satanella pressed a button, and the catch of the door clicked. The visitor, entering timidly, found herself in a small, dimly-lit ante-room which appeared to have no windows. The door behind her shut automatically.

No sound was audible. Impatiently, feeling rather nervous, she waited. She waited nearly five minutes. Then curtains at the end of the little room, which was rather long and narrow, parted silently of their own accord. After a minute's hesitation Mrs. Ashcombe rose, and passed under them. At once they closed as mysteriously they had parted.

She was standing in a passage, draped with black on either side, and with a heavy black carpet which rendered her footfalls inaudible. She was almost in darkness. At the end of the passage, an orange shaded lamp cast a circle of dim light down upon the carpet. It was

all so mysterious, she began to wish she had not come. Yet this very atmosphere of mystery attracted her, as it attracts, without their knowing it, the majority of gullible folk who patronise such "mystics."

At the end of the passage, where the lamp burned, she caught her breath. A figure, all in black, stood there. A black cowl concealed the face, and the hands were also hidden. It was motionless, so motionless, that for the first moments she doubted if it really were alive.

When, at last, it slowly raised its head, she saw a face deathly white. The eyes were black as pitch. The lips were red, artificially coloured. It looked her in the eyes without the flicker of an eyelid, for some moments. Then at last it spoke. The voice was deep, cadaverous.

"You have come—to consult—the oracle?" it asked. The words were spoken slowly, very clearly.

She murmured that she had.

"You have come a great way, I see. Two hundred miles or more. Come, woman."

The figure lifted the black curtain with its arm, and Mrs. Ashcombe entered.

She was in a room lit by little lamps, all heavily shaded. All in this room, too, was black. The table was black oak. The two fauteuils were upholstered in black. The walls were hung with black draperies. The ceiling looked like ebony. It was all most depressing and rather weird.

The figure pointed to a fauteuil, and Mrs. Ashcombe sank down into it. The figure sat opposite and remained motionless, bolt upright, looking at her hard.

"I know everything about you," it said at last. "Everything. I cannot tell you all, it is too—too terrible."

"Please, I want everything to be told," Mrs. Ashcombe murmured quickly.

"I cannot—I dare not. Give me both your hands."

She did so. The figure's hands were cold and moist. Thus for a minute they remained without speaking. Then the figure said, still in a deep, sepulchral tone:

"You have come all this way especially to see me. You started early and arrived this afternoon. You have a daughter. I can see her. She is quite young. I see another daughter, she is like her, very like her, but I see her only dimly. Yes, she is dead. She died lately, some months or so ago—three months ago—ah!"

She dropped Mrs. Ashcombe's hands as though they had suddenly stung her.

"Woman!" she exclaimed abruptly, in a tragic tone, "woman, how can you come to me with blood upon your hands."

Her victim by this time was trembling all over.

"I did not—I swear to you—I did not . . . and yet . . . "

Her mouth and throat were dry. Try as she would she could not speak.

"You did not, that I see," Satanella continued, "but he——"

"Ah, don't—don't say the name, I beseech of you," Mrs. Ashcombe implored. She was perspiring all over. Her bosom rose and fell. She was terribly distressed.

"No, I will not say the name, but I know it as I know your name. Your name begins with A. It ends with E. Now do you doubt my knowledge of your past life?"

"I never doubted it."

The woman trembled.

"Everything you say to me is secret, woman, as secret

as your knowledge of who killed your daughter Ella.” Mrs. Ashcombe sprang up.

“Who are you?” she cried excitedly. “Who told you all this?”

“Woman, be calm,” Satanella went on in the same cadaverous tones. “None told me. I read the past of all who come to me, as I can read their future. As I look at you now, I see, as in a haze about you, a pretty country cottage. It has a thatched roof. It is curiously designed. Over the door there is a porch. A little porch of plaited straw. I see people in the house. Men. Two men. They are young,” and she went on to describe Gerald Grey, and afterwards Bobbie Tolhurst.

“The taller of the two is in trouble,” she went on, “in dire distress. He has been arrested. He is suspected of——”

She stopped abruptly. Mrs. Ashcombe had reseated herself.

“Woman,” the figure said suddenly, “*where is your husband now?*”

“I cannot say. I do not know,” she cried. “Indeed, indeed, I do not.”

“I could tell you, but I will not. And tell me this, although I know it, why did you, until lately, conceal the existence of your other daughter?”

“I had to. There were reasons”

“What reasons?”

“Must I say?”

“Why fear, as I already know? This daughter, so like your other child that she might well be a twin, is—is not your husband’s child.”

Though merely a guess, it proved correct, for Mrs. Ashcombe bowed her head.

"She is my dead sister's child. I have been keeping her, unknown to my husband, for several years. If the discovery had been made, my husband would have been annoyed; he is a most violent man. But he was abroad, had been abroad for two years. I paid someone to mind her and bring her up. Then, when my daughter died, I felt I must have Polly. I loved her. I had always loved her, though I had seen her only rarely. Now I could not do without her."

"And your husband?"

"For years I have not seen him, and yet I love him still. Oh, I love him most intensely. Cannot you send him back to me, as you must know where he is?"

Suddenly she sat up.

"Where is he? Oh, tell me where he is!"

"That I must not—yet. And I must not explain why. If you come to me again, some day, perhaps then"

She stopped. She was staring into vacancy over Mrs. Ashcombe's shoulder. Her eyes were fixed. The eyelids did not quiver. Then, all at once, they seemed to focus something.

"I see him—I can see him dimly—ah, now more distinctly"

"Who? Who?" Mrs. Ashcombe cried. "My husband?"

"No, the man, the father of your sister's child. He is dying. Someone is beside him, bending over him—a woman. He is whispering to her. Now her lips are pressed upon his forehead"

Suddenly she fixed Mrs. Ashcombe with her gaze.

"You are the woman," she said slowly. "The man is dying—he has telegraphed for you to come. He died recently, about the time your daughter died—it may

have been the same day. He sent for you and you went to him at once. Is not that what happened?"

"Yes! Oh, yes," Mrs. Ashcombe stammered out between her sobs, for she was now weeping bitterly. "He died in Exeter the very night poor Ella died. It was so long since I had seen him."

"Woman, you lie! He did not die in Exeter."

"No, but very near. The village where he died is called Kenton. His death was very sudden. By mere chance, before he died, he found I lived in Shadcombe."

Satanella rose slowly.

"I cannot tell you more—now," she said. "But you will come again."

"But the future," Mrs. Ashcombe exclaimed eagerly, extending her arm as though she would detain the mystic. "I must know about my future, know what is to become of me"

"In a case such as yours the strain upon the mystic is too great," Satanella continued solemnly. "I have told you your past. You have confided in me now. You will come again. Then I will tell you your future."

"But when? How soon?"

"In thirty days from now. Not one day sooner."

Out in the street again, Mrs. Ashcombe breathed more freely. Truth to tell, the woman had alarmed her more than she would admit. Never before in her experience of clairvoyants—and she had visited many—had revelations so uncanny been made to her. The woman was marvellous, she told herself. And she must know the murderer. That was terrible to think of.

Yet not once did it occur to her to think there might be collusion between Satanella and her cook.

That evening Irene Baxter's principal detective, sat writing in the offices of the Detective Agency in Oxford Street. The letter to her "chief" contained a concisely-worded record of her interview with Mrs. Ashcombe. By midnight it was posted. By noon next day Irene had received it.

So that was the secret of Polly's concealment during all that time. And she was not a twin at all. Small wonder, under the circumstances, she should be so different in character and temperament from what her sister had been, Irene reflected as she refolded the letter. It was satisfactory to know for certain that Mrs. Ashcombe was not a widow, though this she had suspected from the first. Of course, now she understood why mystery had been made of the friend who died in Exeter.

Well, a scandal of that description would have set Shadcombe talking, and all the neighbourhood too. For in a small provincial town a woman deemed to be respectable, and then found not to be, is soon made to realise her position most acutely.

One thing her colleague had not discovered, and at this Irene was disappointed. No mention was made of the town or county where the Ashcombes had formerly lived. Mrs. Ashcombe had travelled largely, but she must have had a home. Perhaps at the next séance this would be disclosed.

Next morning cook announced that she wished to leave. Oh, no, she had nothing to find fault with. Her mistress had been most considerate, most kind. The situation suited her in every way, but one. That "one" was the climate. She found it too relaxing. She needed bracing air, and she needed a sandy soil. Clay soil, red earth, and a sea atmosphere never had agreed with her,

she declared. She would leave at once and forfeit a month's wages.

As she returned to her kitchen after the interview, she reflected that a great change had come over Mrs. Ashcombe. She looked serious, pensive, and extremely worried.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. OCTAVIUS MILO

THE Court was crowded when Gerald Grey came up for cross-examination.

The cross-examiner was a tall, thin-lipped, clean-shaven gentleman accustomed to intimidating and brow-beating defenseless witnesses. His common mode of procedure was, first of all, to harass and bully his victim until the latter either lost his temper, or became hopelessly confused, and then to loose off at him, with the rapidity of a machine-gun, a number of pointed questions, in the hope that one or more of them would trip him up. Generally the plan succeeded, with the result that counsel obtained considerable kudos. Yet in point of fact he was not clever. All he could boast was a measure of low cunning and an acid tongue.

"You say that on the night of February the sixteenth last," he observed, looking sharply over his glasses at Grey as he set him this initial question, "you were at home drafting a conveyance. Did you receive any visitor that evening? Did any clerk, for instance, come to see you on any matter?"

"Nobody came to see me."

"I understand your servant, Jobbins, was away on holiday."

"He was."

"A fortunate misfortune, eh?"

He smiled sarcastically.

"So that nobody saw you between," he referred to his notes, "between six o'clock in the evening on the sixteenth, when you left your office, and seven o'clock on the morning of the seventeenth, when your man, Jobbins, came in to call you?"

Grey nodded.

"Please don't nod," examining Counsel said petulantly. "Answer 'Yes' or 'No.' "

"No, nobody,"

"I suppose on the sixteenth you dined somewhere?"

"Cold supper was left out for me. I ate it about nine o'clock."

"You have a singularly retentive memory, Mr. Grey," his examiner said with a sneer. "I could not remember the exact time at which I partook of any particular meal on some particular day three or four months ago."

"Possibly not. I have a good memory. An excellent memory."

"So it would appear," ironically. "On the other hand as your man 'happened' to be absent that night, and as you 'happened' to have a cold supper, unobserved, that night; and as it 'happens' nobody saw you from six in the evening until seven next morning, it also 'happens' we have only your word to go upon."

Grey flushed, but held himself in check.

Counsel turned to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I will ask you to pay particular attention to these unusual and most unfortunate 'happenings' and to bear them well in mind."

The foreman of the jury nodded. A pompous creature, bursting with his own importance, he was then and there prejudiced against Grey.

"Now," Counsel continued, "on the night of February

the nineteenth, the day of the inquest, you were alone in your bedroom, in your house in Landscore, Shadcombe, with the door locked; you were heard to lock it. This was between ten and midnight. You were further heard, as your two maidservants will presently testify, walking restlessly up and down the room. Several times you uttered exclamations aloud, as though you were greatly perturbed. And upon one of these occasions you exclaimed ‘Why did I do it—why did I do it?’ Why had you done what?”

A murmur of interest rippled through the court, but was at once suppressed.

Grey’s fingers, resting upon the rail of the witness-box, twitched nervously.

“I really cannot remember,” he said after a pause.

“Ho! I thought you had such a good memory!”

There was some tittering at the back of the court, and the foreman of the jury made a note upon his shirt-cuff.

“He ‘really’ cannot remember,” Counsel repeated with a sneer. “There are some things he may find it inconvenient to remember. It is like the man who lends money and borrows money. He remembers the one and forgets the other.”

Grey bit his lip, then gave a slight start. He had caught sight of Irene Baxter seated at the back of the court. He had not known she was there. Since the night of his arrest he had neither heard from her nor seen her. What could be her object, he wondered, in coming here now? He noticed that she gazed at him with a curious, tense expression.

Once more Counsel referred to his notes. Then he threw back his head again, stared at Grey over his glasses in a peculiarly offensive way, and said:

"You have an acquaintance, I believe, living here in Exeter, who, like yourself, is a solicitor. His name is Octavius Milo. Am I correct?"

"Quite."

Counsel turned again to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said in a conversational tone. "I would like to draw your attention to the reticence of the witness. His replies to my questions are mostly monosyllables, just as, I am told, he replied to questions at the inquest on the body of the murdered girl. But this, of course, is by the way."

Once more he faced Grey and said:

"This Mr. Octavius Milo, who at present is abroad, was a rival of yours in profession. But he was more than that. I understand that he greatly admired Miss Ella Ashcombe, to whom you were affianced. I have evidence to prove that, on more than one occasion, he and you exchanged some very high words, and that on one occasion, some days before Miss Ashcombe's death, you threatened to strike him. Is that so?"

"That is perfectly correct."

"And is it also 'perfectly correct' that the next time you met Miss Ashcombe you spoke to her in a very autocratic way upon the subject of her friendship with Mr. Octavius Milo?"

"I believe I did."

"You 'believe' so. You are not sure? Perhaps that brilliant memory of yours is at fault again."

"Well, yes. I did say some rather harsh things, I admit."

"And that was the last time you spoke to her before her death?"

Grey caught his breath. He had to swallow before answering. Then he said:

"It was. And that was what I referred to when alone in my room on the night of the inquest, I exclaimed aloud, 'Why did I do it?' I was greatly upset."

"You must have been," counsel answered, nettled that one of his points against his victim should thus unexpectedly have been discounted.

At that moment Grey caught Irene Baxter's eye again. She was smiling.

Thus for nearly an hour he was cross-examined. But none of counsel's sarcastic comments, offensive insinuations, or implied insults was successful in rousing his temper—outwardly. Though inwardly furious, he appeared calm and unmoved.

Other witnesses were called, for and against him. There were his two maids, who had been subpoenaed on the strength of statements they had made to servants in the house next door. They liked their master, and were terribly upset at being forced to give evidence against him.

Jobbins was cross-examined, and at once lost his temper. He said he had naught but good to say of his master who had "always treated him as a gentleman should." No, he knew nothing whatever of his master's habits or movements. He added that even had he known he would have refused to say anything, and was promptly called to order. Mrs. Ashcombe became hysterical and had to be removed. Polly's answers amused the court, but annoyed counsel exceedingly. The chauffeur, Tom, was quickly dismissed. Many a sovereign and half-sovereign of Grey's had found its way into his pocket from first to last, and he had no wish to slay the goose lest it should lay no more golden eggs. Charlotte's evidence was contradictory and futile. Counsel's bullying seemed to paralyse her senses.

A witness who puzzled every one a good deal was the Chief Constable, who had been present at the inquest. A big, burly man with a shaven, bullet head, he seemed nervous as a child. He made statements, retracted what he had said, qualified assertions he had put forward a moment before and appeared, before the end, almost to have lost his wits. Yet he was known to be, on all ordinary occasions, a first-rate witness, plain and straightforward in his evidence. Everybody noticed his uneasiness and thought it most peculiar.

What surprised every one was that no mention had been made of the bundle tied up with tarred twine that had been found near Hole Head and handed to the police.

Nothing had been heard of the mysterious bundle since that paragraph describing it and its discovery had appeared in the *Express and Echo*—at least so it was said. Yet the packet of letters found in it was supposed to have contained information which had led to the arrest of Gerald Grey.

One outcome of Grey's cross-examination was a curious light shed upon the private life of Octavius Milo.

Milo, it seemed, had been in practice in Exeter eleven years. He had been born and educated "somewhere abroad." That he was clever, everybody admitted. Unfortunately, his professional methods were not all deemed to be "professional" in the sense in which that word is understood by lawyers admittedly above suspicion.

Nothing could actually be said against him, that is to say, no act which he had committed could be pronounced to be dishonest. But some of his methods were what is known as "shady." Still, he invariably "got there" and that, after all, was what his clients paid him to do.

For instance, on one rather famous occasion, when a certain decision had rested with a show of hands, he had suddenly stood up at the shareholders' meeting, and cried:

“Those in favour hold up their hands.”

Many hands had been raised, and Milo had counted them at great speed. Then he had cried again:

“Those who are not in favour, hold up their hands,” and again he had counted rapidly.

“The ‘ayes’ have it,” he had said calmly and then resumed his seat.

Yet in point of fact, the “nays” had a majority. Nobody, however, had checked his count and by this bit of smartness he had saved the shareholders, for whom he was acting, several hundreds of pounds.

It is Octavius Milo’s private life, however, with which we are more particularly concerned.

He was not married. Yet there were rumours . . . Well, they were strange rumours, to say the least, and they did not redound to his credit. Really they were more than rumours, for certain facts had come to light.

There is no need to describe them in detail. Only they were such that fond mothers, resident in the neighbourhood, were wont to look askance at Milo, or, at, most, be only coldly polite to him.

But there was one thing that most women did not like about him. It was obvious to all that he had Eurasian blood in his veins. He was singularly dark-skinned. His smooth hair was black as ink. His eyes—very fine eyes—were like bits of jet. Also he had what is commonly called a “piercing gaze.”

He often went abroad, nobody knew exactly where. As a rule he was absent from a month to six weeks. Now he had been absent since Ella Ashcombe’s death,

about three months. In his absence his managing clerk, a qualified solicitor enough, but, as the townspeople said, "obviously not a gentleman," carried on his practice.

In the Shadcombe Club, a cosy nook that formerly was a private residence, and that lies tucked away in a private garden on the outskirts of Shadcombe, close to the sea wall, elderly gentlemen foregather daily, about noon, to discuss local happenings and pronounce momentous decisions on the great events of the day.

It was one morning, a week after Grey's cross-examination, that several of these members were seated in the Club *kiosk*, discussing events and at intervals peering out at sea, or at bathers on the beach through the long telescope, which, mounted on a tripod, protrudes over the Cliff Walk like a gun from its concealed emplacement.

"Deuced queer thing," one of them presently remarked. "Deuced queer. Octavius Milo is supposed to be abroad, yet I saw him twice while I was at Winchester the other day."

"Really? What was he doing?" a retired Colonel, the local quidnunc, inquired, metaphorically cocking his ear.

"Oh, rambling about—with a lady."

"A lady? Who was she?"

"Ask me another. The first time was in Bereweeke Road, a little-frequented road just outside the town, beyond the station. He was walking with her. I caught only a glimpse of her as my taxi went by, but I saw she was good-looking and very well-dressed. The other time was right away on Mornhill, near the site of the old leper hospital—a stone with an inscription marks the spot, you know, about two miles out of the town. I hap-

pened to pass a turn in the lane, and there they both were standing close by—I could hear their voices. They were talking very earnestly and I distinctly heard Milo mention Gerald Grey's name."

"But didn't he see you?"

"No, neither time. I looked away quickly the second time. I didn't want to be recognized."

At this juncture a younger member, who for some minutes had been looking intently through the telescope at a black speck some miles out at sea, turned suddenly.

"Funny your speaking of Milo," he said. "Here he is."

"Here! Where?"

"Sailing in a skiff. If that isn't Milo lying back in the stern holding that girl's hands, I'll—well, I'll treat you all to cigars."

The retired Colonel sprang to his feet. He was an active old gentleman with quite white hair.

"By Jove, so it is!" he exclaimed, after glueing his eye to the glass. "What's more, they are quarrelling."

"Having the deuce of a row, I should say," the first speaker said with a laugh.

And then, each in turn, the five satisfied themselves that no mistake had been made.

The Colonel sat down again.

"They are making the harbour," he remarked carelessly. "I shall happen to be there when they land."

Then he smiled significantly, rose, and went out.

CHAPTER IX

THE DANCER IN YELLOW

SAN FRANCISCO has been called the most vicious city in the world. In point of fact it is nothing of the sort. Port Said, for instance, is infinitely worse; but it is doubtful whether any one town in any "civilised" country is really much worse than any other, in respect to vice. It is mostly a case of what we see and what we don't see. Where evil is uncloaked it naturally follows that evil is deemed to be more prevalent there.

Before the earthquake, the City of the Golden Gate, as San Francisco is sometimes called, was certainly one of the most cosmopolitan towns in America, ranking in that respect probably next to New Orleans. Since the earthquake its cosmopolitanism has increased. To-day on Market Street at any time of day, and during most hours of the night, you will meet men and women of almost every nationality. Plutocrats and other rich folk stay mostly at the Palace Hotel. Drummers, *i.e.*, commercial travellers, patronise the Bay, the Dromio and the San Salvador. Men and women of leisure but of modest means foregather largely at the Ibex.

In the stage-box of the Midway Plaisance Theatre of Varieties in 'Frisco a rough-looking man of seafaring aspect sat alone with his head resting between his hands, staring at a lightly-draped artist in yellow, performing a dance which, though applauded in

that none-too-refined temple of entertainment, would scarcely have been tolerated by any London audience.

When she had finished, and had bowed and bowed again her appreciation of the ovation accorded to her by a tumultuous house, and then given an encore and retired, the man in the box sat down slowly, leaned back in his chair, blew a cloud of smoke out into the auditorium and exclaimed in a gruff voice:

“Say, that puts the loop round it!”

He pressed a button and a chocolate-coloured attendant in white ducks with red-and-gold facings brought him a gin-fizz, the drink peculiar to New Orleans and San Francisco.

“Say, sonny,” the man said after tossing the lad a dollar and telling him to keep the change, “I want to meet that gurl after the show.”

“Yes, sah.”

The boy grinned, showing white teeth.

“Tell her it’s Wal Marner and he’s in—whatever this box is.”

“Yes, sah. And if she says ‘No,’ sah?”

“She won’t say ‘No,’ if you say it’s Wal Marner. Nobody has ever yet said ‘No’ to Wal Marner, and nobody ever will. Say, you never heard of Wal Marner?”

“No, sah.”

“No, sah,” he mimicked. “Then come right here, shake right here,” and he took the lad’s hand and shook it warmly. “A lad of your size and never heard o’ Wal Marner is some freak kid. And now git!”

The rest of the performance apparently bored him, for he lay back in his chair, smoking with hardly a glance towards the stage.

In a glittering saloon a man and woman sat at supper an hour later. It was nearly one in the morning, and yet the place showed no sign of closing, and the band still played. Indeed fresh arrivals were still entering and ordering supper, or champagne, or both.

"So you have been out from London a month," the man named Marner said suddenly, as he refilled her glass.

"Six weeks. Why, who told you?"

"Never mind who told me. I know all about you—every thing. But to-night's the first time I have seen you. Say, you've heard of me?"

"Do you suppose if I hadn't I'd have come when you asked me to like that?" And she gave her head a little toss. "I came because I've so often heard of you, and so I wanted to see for myself the sort of man you are."

"Not heard much good of me, that I'll be bound."

"No good at all, except that you are horribly rich."

Wal Marner laughed.

"Ho! But now to come to what I sent for you for."

"Sent for me!"

"Sent for you. There is a man in England I'm told you know—vurry, vurry well. He's a lawyer. Lives in Exeter now. His name is Octavius Milo."

The woman sat bolt upright. Her face had suddenly flushed. She was not very good-looking, nor was she quite young, but she had fine eyes, and, judging by her expression, and her firm mouth, a good deal of character.

"Who has told you all this about me, Mr. Marner?" she inquired with enforced calmness.

"Never mind. I know, and that's enough or should be. Octavius Milo did you down once, didn't he?"

"Once! Three or four times you mean. I forgave

him several times, but I never shall again—never. I don't know why I ever did, except because——”

“Because you loved him. A woman'll do any fool thing when she loves a man. But let that go. Acting as your lawyer, wasn't he, when he did you down?”

“Yes. And in addition he openly robbed me of three thousand pounds.”

“Good. Then you'd like to take it out of him, get back on him, eh?”

“Indeed I would. I'd do anything to get back on him.”

“Would you forge his name?” he asked quickly.

She started.

“Certainly not,” she said in a low tone.

“Suppose I force you to?”

“You couldn't.”

“You think not?”

He gave a little chuckle, then slowly produced some letters from his pocket, enclosed in a stout envelope. The envelope looked as if it had been a long time in his pocket.

“These scripts,” he remarked carelessly, as he shook them out into his hand, which he kept well out of her reach, “these scripts were forged, you hear what I say, forged by you: the man you forged them for is a friend of mine and has told me everything. You secured him a big sum of money by your penmanship, but he paid you your share.”

He was looking at her cruelly. He saw how agitated she had become.

“Mr. Marner,” she exclaimed in a weak voice, “for goodness' sake give them to me.”

“That is what I mean to do, provided”

He stopped, his gaze still fixed upon her.

"Oh, but I can't. I can't do that. I believe I know your plan now. I have guessed it. But think, what would happen to me if it were found out?"

"It was not found out the last time," he tapped the letters meaningly. "It won't be found out this time neither."

"But it very nearly was, last time," she exclaimed in a piteous voice.

"It won't be even very nearly this time. Gad! if I had your talent I'd be many times richer to-day than I already am. Many a time I have longed to have that talent that you possess—able to imitate handwriting so that nobody in the world can see the difference. What a gift to have if you have brains to match. And I'm sure you have the brains."

All this happened a good while before the elderly members of the Shadcombe Club had betrayed such deep interest in the doings of Octavius Milo and his companion in the boat. The retired Colonel, who had stumped all the way down to Shadcombe Harbour in order to catch a closer glimpse of Milo's friend, had been disappointed. For the skiff, after tracking across the bar at the harbour's mouth, had turned to the left and landed at Kingston, an old-world fishing village on the opposite side of the river. It had not occurred to the Colonel that this might happen, and in consequence he returned home to lunch in an exceedingly morose mood.

From the boat the two had walked leisurely as far as Hunter's Lodge, which faces the approach to the bridge across the river. There they had entered a car awaiting them, and had at once started off up the steep two-mile hill in the direction of Torquay.

Milo was not in love with this newly-found friend of his, but was immensely attracted by her, that he himself would readily have admitted. He had met her quite by accident at dinner one night at an hotel in Shrewsbury. They had happened to dine at the same table, the room being crowded, owing to Race Week, and conversation had been started by her upsetting a glass of wine and then apologising to him profusely for her carelessness.

"Really it is not of the slightest consequence," he had answered good-humouredly. As the meal progressed he had incidentally mentioned that he was only passing through Shrewsbury, on his way to Winchester, where he meant to spend a week or two fishing.

"What an odd coincidence," she had answered. "I go to Winchester, too, next week. I have rented a little house just outside the town. Perhaps one day you will honour me with a visit."

"I shall be charmed," he had at once answered. "You will give me your address there, before I leave to-morrow?"

He liked her voice, he reflected that night as he prepared to go to bed. It had an unusual *timbre* which appealed to him. From the visitors' register he had ascertained, before going upstairs, that she was a Mrs. Lethbridge, Mrs. Cyril Lethbridge. Had she a husband, he wondered? She had made no mention of any husband. But then, he remembered she had told him next to nothing about herself.

And so it came about that in Winchester the chance acquaintanceship had ripened into friendship. Indeed, during their stay there, Milo went so far as to tell her a great deal about himself, a thing he rarely did to anybody. And she was growing fond of him. Of that

he felt certain. This knowledge somehow gratified his vanity.

"Yes, I have travelled a good deal," he said to her one evening, in answer to some remark. "Western America and the Pacific Slope I know well. In fact I returned from there only recently."

"Really? Why, how interesting. You were travelling for pleasure, I suppose?"

"Yes, for pleasure—my annual long holiday."

"Oh, then you have a profession? Somehow I took you to be a man of leisure. I wonder what you are by profession?"

"Well, if it interests you to know, I will tell you. I am a lawyer."

"A barrister?"

"Oh, no, nothing so ambitious. Merely a solicitor, and a country solicitor at that—at Exeter."

"Exeter. I used to know some people down that way, the Willie Moncktons. Possibly you have met them."

"I have heard of them. They live in Shadcombe."

"Yes, that is the place. I met a charming man at their house; why, of course, he was a lawyer too. His name was Grey—Gerald Grey."

Milo looked at her sharply. A man was crossing the corner of the road. He was looking the other way, however, so they did not see his face. It was, as we know, the retired Colonel.

"Gerald Grey?" Milo said after a moment's pause. "Yes, I know him. At least I have met him. You thought him charming? Well, I can't say I do. Something shady about him, I am afraid, to say the least."

"Is there? Do tell me."

"You must never say I told you, if I do."

"Of course I won't. What is there shady about him?"

"Well, for one thing he is generally believed to know something about the murder of a girl to whom he was supposed to be engaged to be married, a girl called Ella Ashcombe. The affair made a great stir Devon way, at the time. Didn't you read about it?"

"No, I rarely read police news. Was it long ago?"

"Last February. Grey was arrested quite recently, on suspicion of being at any rate indirectly implicated in the crime, but as nothing could be actually proved they had to let him go again."

"How dreadful! Why, now I do remember something about the case, but I didn't read it. A woman told me about it. A most wonderful professional dancer. Yes, that was the name—Ella Ashcombe. This woman, I must not tell you her name, had been odiously treated, swindled and openly robbed by some lawyer she had been in love with. I could not get her to say his name. She told me she had travelled with him in the States, the Western States, just where you have been. He told her some cock-and-bull story about mines and things out there—oh, I forget what it all was, at least I did not listen—and after gaining her confidence he decamped with over fifteen thousand dollars belonging to her. It was in California this happened, I remember her telling me, and she said that twice before he had robbed her, but on those occasions he robbed her indirectly in connection with some companies or other. Mustn't he be a brute?"

Milo swallowed. Then he said:

"He must be, indeed. And about that murder, what did she say?"

"That she knew all along the man who had swindled and robbed her had had a hand in it, and that she was going to expose him."

"She said that, did she?" Milo exclaimed quickly. Then he added more quietly. "In that case, I wonder why she hasn't done so. How long ago did she tell you all this?"

"Oh, not long ago. When I was last in Paris. She was dancing there."

One day Octavius Milo, surrendering to a sudden impulse, attempted to take Mrs. Lethbridge's hand in his own. She put his arm away gently, then, without a word, pointed to her wedding ring.

"You have a husband?" he inquired in a low tone.

"I had," she murmured with emotion. "He is dead. But his memory remains with me always—and always will."

Her companion deemed it tactful not to press the question further then. He decided, however, that some day in the future he would refer to it again and find out how long she had been a widow.

Thus their intimacy grew. When the end of his holiday drew near he felt that he would miss her greatly, so one afternoon while they were walking together in the lanes towards Pitt Corner, beyond the hospital, he made a suggestion to her which had occurred to him the week before.

It was to the effect that when he returned to Exeter she should go and stay for a little while at Torquay. He described the beauty of the place, which he declared resembled Genoa, where she told him she had once spent a winter which she had thoroughly enjoyed. He added that during the summer she would find plenty going on there.

At first she hesitated. He had, however, little difficulty in persuading her to adopt his proposal.

"I can assure you that you won't regret going there," he said, elated, "especially as you have never been in Torquay. I can recommend a good hotel. There is quite a quaint little theatre there, too, and excellent concerts and entertainments take place at the Bath Saloon and at the Pavilion."

And so it came about that they left Winchester together for South Devon.

But more than that happened. Milo had not intended, when he craftily proposed her going to Torquay, that she should remain there alone. During the first day or two of her visit he came from Exeter to see her and spent the afternoon with her. Then one night he missed the last train back to Exeter. This, as he said, put an idea into his head, really it had first entered it when they were at Winchester. He would take a room at the hotel in Torquay and "run up" to Exeter every day to attend to his practice. He "ran up" for two days. Then he completed the plan he had formed. He remained in Torquay, as he lightly put it to Mrs. Lethbridge, he would "give the law a rest."

Mrs. Lethbridge came down to breakfast every morning; they now always breakfasted together. Invariably she was the first down, and as she passed the letter-rack in the hall, she would, after taking her letters, take out his also, carelessly look through them, and then replace them in the rack. Indeed, at any time she saw letters awaiting him she would take them out and casually glance at their postmarks.

One morning, whilst looking through his letters in this way, she came upon one which had been readdressed from Exeter. It bore an American stamp and the post-

mark "Los Angeles, Cal." Without an instant's hesitation she put it in with her own letters, then slipped the lot into her bag. Not until the evening did Milo find that letter awaiting him in the rack.

That night Mrs. Lethbridge posted two letters. One was addressed to Baxter's Detective Agency, the other was directed to Gerald Grey. And both bore the signature of "Irene Baxter."

CHAPTER X

A WOMAN'S CONFESSION

THE office of the proprietor and managing-director of Baxter's Detective Agency resembled a boudoir in Mayfair, rather than a business office in Oxford Street.

Quite a large apartment, its paper was delicately tinted, its furniture was mostly antique, while upon the walls hung rare prints and mezzotints. At one end of the room was a full-length mirror, and there were other mirrors as well. The firegrate came from some old country manor house, and had brass dogs on each side. Upon several tables were flowers in profusion. Only the large writing-table was out of harmony. It stood in the middle of the room and upon it were two telephone transmitters, a metaphone, and a row of electric bell-buttons.

Irene Baxter sat at the writing-table, apparently deep in thought. She had a trick, when thinking hard, of drumming upon the table with the fingers of her right hand. She was drumming now. Presently she stopped, unlocked and opened a drawer, and took out of it an unframed photograph.

It was the portrait of a well-set-up, good-looking young man, with a keen, intelligent face and a high forehead. The lips were slightly parted, as though he were going to speak. The eyes looked straight into her own.

For several minutes she sat staring at it. Suddenly something purred at her elbow. Quickly looking at the photograph again, she picked up the metaphone.

"Show him in in a minute," she said, in answer to an inquiry.

For a moment she stood before the long mirror. By the time the door opened she was again seated at the table.

Gerald Grey looked out of temper as he entered, and as he shook hands, the girl noticed a certain stiffness in his manner. She pushed forward a chair, and he seated himself.

"You will have gathered from my letter," he said, "that I am not—well, not entirely satisfied with your work, Miss Baxter. Here I am paying you large cheques, and what have you done? Practically nothing."

"Excuse me," she answered quickly. "I have 'done' a great deal. You mean that I have 'discovered' practically nothing."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"It would if it were so. I may have discovered 'practically' nothing. Theoretically I have found out a good deal."

"Is 'theoretical' discovery of any use?"

"Of great use. I always build on theory. Practical proof of the correctness of my theories comes later. You must please have patience, Mr. Grey."

"You said that to me on a previous occasion, if I am not mistaken."

"And I may say it to you on a future occasion. I admit that this problem you have set me is one of the hardest I have ever had to solve. Consequently it may take time."

"It certainly is doing that," Grey put in with a rather sarcastic smile. "Is it likely to take much longer?"

"It is."

She stopped abruptly. She felt her heart thumping. For an instant she dreaded that she was going to break down, betray her feelings. Meanwhile Grey, noticing nothing, went on:

"To come to the point, Miss Baxter. I don't want to appear ungrateful for what you have done or tried to do, I mean for all the trouble I am sure you have taken, but I fear—if I may speak bluntly—that the task you have set yourself is greater than you can cope with. Therefore, I am going to suggest, and I hope you will not take it amiss, that I should now pay you any further fees I may owe to your agency, and that you give up trying to solve this difficult problem."

"Which means that you will employ some other agency, or person."

"Well, as you put it so—yes."

He noticed now that she was trembling, also that she had turned very pale. At the same moment he recollect ed the intense pride she had herself once told him she took in her detective concern and in her own ability. He hated hurting anybody's feelings, and now he regretted having spoken quite so plainly. Still what was the use of her going on trying to accomplish what she evidently could not achieve, and of his paying sums which he could ill afford? If only she

"Mr. Grey."

As she spoke she caught her breath.

"Yes?" he said in a more conciliatory tone.

"I am going to ask you a favour."

"Yes?"

Suddenly her expression completely changed. She rose and stood before him, her breast rising and falling, while her locked fingers fidgeted nervously.

"Oh, Mr. Grey," she exclaimed, and her tone was very piteous, "Oh, Mr. Grey, don't you know—can't you see . . . ?"

She stopped, unable to go on.

"See what?" he asked in astonishment, unable with manlike obtuseness to recognise what any woman would have realised at once.

"I can't help it—I must say it—I must!" she exclaimed desperately, and even he saw then how pathetic her expression was.

Mr. Grey, pray do not think me immodest when I confess that I like you and what I have tried to do for you has given me pleasure. Perhaps I ought not to say it, but. . . ."

She sank into her chair again and hid her face in her hands.

Grey got up and came to her. He put his hand upon her head, and she trembled as if electricity had thrilled her.

Suddenly she sat up and, as she turned her eyes towards him, he realised that there was undeclared love in them.

"Poor little girl," he said after a pause. Her look, so utterly pathetic, touched him. "I am so sorry, I really, really am, Irene."

He knew how bald his words must sound to her, yet he could think of nothing else. To his surprise, her eyes shone.

"Ah, call me that always—do—do!"

"What! 'Irene'?"

"Yes, 'Irene.' I love to hear the name coming from your lips. It does me good to hear it."

"Of course, I will, Irene. And you won't call me Mr. Grey any more, you understand?"

Again he looked into her love-lit eyes. He was only human. The ardent gaze which imparted to her face an entirely new expression seemed to make her almost beautiful. Something stirred within him. Her hypnotic will moved his spirit. Unconsciously he took a step forward

His arms were about her and he gave her a kiss, which she returned passionately.

When at last he released her, she looked covered with confusion.

"You must think me awful," she said at last. "But, Gerald, that is the first time I have ever kissed a man. And never before have I let any man kiss me. Will you forgive me—Gerald?"

He smiled.

"There is nothing to forgive that I can see," he said. "I am only sorry that you have come to feel like that, seeing that I don't love you in return. Still, we can be friends, can't we?"

"Friends," she murmured dreamily. "Yes, great friends. That is all."

Gradually she grew more normal.

"I have not asked that favour yet," she said suddenly. "May I ask it now?"

"Do, please."

"It is only this. I want you to let me carry on this case, continue my investigations. And I want you not to employ anybody else at all. I believe that I shall solve the mystery in time. I am sure that I am coming to it slowly. And look——"

She opened a drawer and took out some papers. Amongst them were some cheques. The latter she put together and pushed across the table to him."

"These are yours," she said calmly. "Not one of them has been presented and I don't want them. From the first I decided that I would not take money from you. Somehow I felt I could not—from you. And I feel like that still. Take them and destroy them. That is the other favour I ask."

Grey's first impulse was to object, to say that he could not let her work for nothing, and to utter other commonplace platitudes. But he checked himself. He had intuition enough to realise that this girl was no ordinary type of woman, that in many ways she was abnormal. Her intense cleverness he had recognised long ago. The scene she had just enacted revealed the temperament she possessed, and such a temperament must, he was quick to recognise, be humoured.

"Very well," he said. "We will let it go at that. You shall go on as you are doing. I will send no more cheques. And I promise to leave the affair entirely in your hands."

She was about to speak when the wooden cup purred again.

"Yes," she said, speaking into the metaphone. "Who is it?"

Grey saw her start.

"Tell him that Mr. Baxter will be disengaged in ten minutes and ask him to wait, please. I will ring up when I am ready."

She stood up quickly. Once again she was the alert, intelligent, rather matter-of-fact woman she had, until to-day, always appeared to him to be.

"Mr. Octavius Milo has called to see me profes-

ally," she said, "or rather to see Mr. Baxter. I'm Mr. Baxter. Now, Gerald, you can help me materially. And you are going to hear all that he is going to say to me. Come through here."

She pressed a button which a framed mezzotint had concealed, and a door, until then invisible, revolved upon a vertical axis.

"You don't want me to eavesdrop, surely!" he exclaimed, drawing back.

"You must. It is of vital importance that you should hear. I know Mr. Milo intimately and——"

"You know Milo!"

"Yes, but he won't recognise me in a moment. Come."

CHAPTER XI

AMONG THE HEATHER

IT was Shadcombe tennis-week. On the great lawn everybody who was anybody in the town or in the neighbourhood had foregathered. Mrs. Willie Monckton, in a pale-mauve gown, which showed her figure to perfection, sat surrounded by some of her satellites. She looked very beautiful that day and felt pleased with everybody and with herself in particular. What woman is not pleased when she knows she is the centre of attraction, and that that attraction is created by her good looks and her pretty frock? She could afford to smile at the one or two uncharitable remarks about herself which she chanced to overhear.

But there were many pretty women there that afternoon. There was a well-known concert artist to whom Bobbie Tolhurst seemed to be paying marked attention, which was not to be wondered at, as she eventually became his bride. There were twin-sisters, both fair and exceptionally good-looking, who came annually to Shadcombe from somewhere near London, and generally excited a good deal of admiration. There was also a pretty girl camouflaged to look like a lady, of whom nobody knew anything except that she was companion to an upholstered woman of unprepossessing appearance, but reputed "enormously wealthy" by the tradespeople. It was commonly supposed at that time

that some of this woman's fortune would one day accrue to her pretty girl companion, but when the former was "interred," as the *Shadcombe Gazette* put it, the pretty girl found herself the recipient only of a silver teapot with tea-cosy complete, a pair of silver candlesticks and a full-length portrait of her benefactress.

She went away crying.

The looks cast at Gerald Grey as he strolled on to the lawn about tea-time, with a slim, good-looking boy who wore glasses and had sleek, black hair, were none too cordial. Since his arrest, and scathing cross-examination, the town and district residents had rather cold-shouldered him. True, nothing at all had been proved against him, but still

Well, the affair had created a good deal of talk, and talk of an unpleasant nature, and residents in a small town, who rarely quit that small town, dislike that sort of thing.

A woman who spoke no ill of him, nor had ever done so, was Mrs. Willie Monckton. Indeed, she rarely spoke ill of any one. When she did, she usually had some good cause for doing so.

"You are late, Mr. Grey," she said smiling, as he approached.

"I have been to the station to meet a friend," he answered. "Let me introduce him. Frank, I want to present you to Mrs. Monckton. Mrs. Monckton, an old school friend of mine, Frank Rawlins."

Rawlins smiled. Mrs. Monckton looked at him with interest. He was almost girlish in appearance, she thought, but he had a nice face and good teeth.

They all sat there talking, Mrs. Monckton's satellites joining in the conversation. Presently a voice near by made them all look up. It was Milo.

"We just pulled it off, and that is all," he was saying to Bobbie Tolhurst. "My partner made several bad blunders. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Monckton," as he caught her eye. "Afternoon everybody." He avoided seeing Grey. "Hullo, whom have we here?"

A woman much made up was coming along the path. She was somewhat overdressed; that anyone could see, even at that distance. But she carried herself well, and gracefully, and walked with a freedom uncommon amongst Englishwomen. Many lorgnons were raised in scrutiny as she approached. She was a stranger to every one, apparently, though clearly a personality of some sort. As a personality she aroused interest. As a stranger she stimulated hostility.

"Deuced fine woman," was the first audible comment made about her. It was the retired Colonel who spoke. He fancied himself a judge of female beauty, and was certainly no mean critic.

"Just look how those cats are glaring at her," he went on in an undertone. "Jealous of her, every one; jealous as a lot of schoolgirls."

Just then Frank Rawlins turned.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, his face brightening. "My half-sister. Come, Gerald, I'll make you known to each other. Yvonne has heard me talk of you."

He had spoken distinctly, in a rather high, boyish voice, so that many seated on the lawn had heard him. Some of these people smiled condescendingly.

"What a half-sister!" one of them said to her friend seated near. Then they both laughed.

Soon Yvonne had joined the group which centred round Mrs. Monckton. It was clear that the newcomer was "not exactly a lady," as the more charitable-tongued put it afterwards, but none the less she

was good company and seemed exceedingly good-natured. She spoke English perfectly.

Nobody noticed Milo's sudden absence. Nor had anybody noticed the pallor that had overspread his features as soon as Yvonne had come within recognising distance.

A week later Mrs. Monckton gave a picnic. Her picnics were always, in the current slang, "awfully well done." Also, she so selected her guests that all who met were, so far as possible, of the same way of thinking. Thus she would not invite ultrastrait-laced residents—and in Shadcombe and Dawlish and other towns in that part there are a few—to meet boys and girls more abreast of the times. People of advanced views met at these picnics other people of advanced views. People with Victorian minds met others with Victorian minds. And thus it came about that Mrs. Willie's picnics, in common with her lunch-parties and her tea-parties, were invariably successful and extremely popular.

Castle Dyke is a square-built tower upon the fringe of Haldon Moor, about two miles out of Dawlish, on the crest of a hill. Upon the south and west of it extend the woods of Luscombe, upon the east those of Ashcombe, where a baronet lives or lived at that time. And from it, by narrow lanes and by-paths, Holcombe may be reached.

They were a merry party that day, and the weather was gloriously hot. Besides the hostess and her girl friends, there were Mrs. Ashcombe and Polly, Yvonne, Bobbie Tolhurst and Gerald Grey, Grey's old school chum, Frank Rawlins, and others who need not be named.

After lunch the party gradually dispersed, some in

little groups, some in twos and threes, wandering in different directions, though most wended their way into the beautiful, undulating, thickly-wooded covers lying east and south.

A group of three, consisting of Grey, Yvonne and her half-brother, when no longer within sight or sound of any of the others, stopped abruptly and looked about them. Then they wandered on through the woods in silence, aimlessly as it seemed.

"How fortunate," Grey said presently, "that Mrs. Willie should have chosen Castle Dyke for this picnic. It gives us just the opportunity we wanted, doesn't it, Irene?"

Frank Rawlins looked up. His face was very grave.

"Yes; in the sense that we are not likely to be warned off. But a thought has just occurred to me. If any of the others come upon us while we are doing this, they will be sure to talk. However——"

He turned to Yvonne.

"I will take the letter now, if you please," he said.

"Frank Rawlins," or Irene Baxter as she may as well be called now, took it from her and unfolded it carefully. It was a dirty, frayed letter, and bits of it were missing. The writing of some of the remainder was obliterated.

They were now near a declivity in the ground from which flints had long ago been quarried. The declivity, or "pocket" as it is called in Devonshire, was overgrown with heather, also with tall ferns.

"This should be about the spot," the girl said, looking up from the letter. Stopping abruptly, she looked about her. "The letter says 'three tall pine-trees and a small one grouped together and'—the next words are worn out 'a milestone in the road can be

seen . . . ? Yes, there is the milestone over there . . . ‘cleft in the ground, nearly hidden by heather . . . ?’ this declivity must be the ‘cleft’ referred to and —yes, these are evidently the three tall trees and a small one grouped together. Why, what’s that?”

She was pointing in the direction of the heather-covered hill they had just clambered down. Suddenly she turned to Yvonne.

“What was the exact date you left San Francisco?” she asked quickly.

The woman told her.

“And you appeared at the Midway Plaisance every night before that?”

“During the whole fortnight before I left.”

“Then what day did you post your letter to Octavius Milo, the one in which you referred to this place and that was forwarded to him at Torquay?”

“I am sure I can’t remember,” Yvonne answered thoughtfully. “It certainly was after Wal Marner had gone from San Francisco.”

“Good. Now come along.”

They followed her along a narrow, ascending sheep track, through the thick purple heather and golden gorse, towards the foot of the hillside. Up this hill, still following the track, which now zig-zagged, they made their way.

Presently Irene stopped and pointed.

Forty or so yards to the left a small dark opening, almost concealed by the dense undergrowth, was visible.

“I am sure that must be it,” she said.

They had to scramble carefully along the face of the hill to get to the opening, but they reached it at last. Irene pushed the undergrowth aside.

Though the entrance was low and narrow, the cave

inside was quite large and deep. Grey struck a match, and they looked about them, interested. Suddenly he stooped.

"This is fortunate," he said. As he spoke he picked up from the ground two tallow candles. One of them was partly burned. He was about to light it, when Irene Baxter stopped him.

"Not that one," she said. "The other. Give me that one."

Now they saw that the cave had been occupied by someone, though not quite recently. The damp ground had boot-marks in several places, marks of hob-nailed boots. Irene told them to be careful not to tread upon or obliterate these marks. In one corner, almost hidden, was an empty rum-jar. There was also a dirty jersey. It was frayed and had holes in it and one arm had been torn off. Beside it lay some twine, a hank of tarred twine tied round with a knot which was peculiar. The only other articles were a broken china mug, a metal spoon, an empty biscuit box, a broken pair of braces, and a pair of worn-out seamen's boots. A fire had at one time been lit round a corner in the cave, where no light would be visible from without, even at night. The charred wood and blackened embers remained.

"Nothing much here," Grey observed. "The bird has flown some time ago."

Carefully Irene Baxter examined everything. The boot-soles did not fit the boot-marks on the ground. The sides and roof of the cave had not been hewn or cut, or touched in any way, but on one side were hewn little clefts, or shelves. There was a small aperture in the roof through which the light of day percolated.

Following her instructions, they left everything as they had found it. Also they took care to efface their own boot-prints before leaving the cave.

When they reached the entrance again, Irene made some notes in shorthand in her pocket-book. Only one thing she had taken, the partly-burned candle.

They were clambering along the face of the hill again, when they heard voices calling. Some of the picnic party were looking for them.

Irene Baxter, in her boy's clothes, looked exceedingly attractive. This was the thought that struck Grey as he watched her walking arm-in-arm with her pretended half-sister, Yvonne, who, of course, was none other than the dancer whom Wal Marner had sent for after her performance in San Francisco.

When they rejoined the remainder of the party, Bobbie Tolhurst was describing some wonderful run of the year before, when the South Devon hounds had met at Castle Dyke. It had been a twelve-mile point, he said, "as fast as they could split." They had found in Luton Bottom, about a mile away, and run through Ugbrooke Park, Lord Clifford of Chudleigh's seat, then on to Stoer Park, and had finally lost their fox somewhere in the direction of Denbury, beyond Newton Abbot.

"Don't you ever hunt?" he ended, addressing Polly Ashcombe. "You ought to, you are such a lightweight."

"I used to regularly," she answered, without thinking.

"Oh? In what country?"

"In Yorkshire with the York and Ainsty and the Bedale, and the——"

"Polly, don't sit on the grass, dear, I am sure it is

damp," her mother interrupted. "Come and sit by me, on this rug."

Instantaneous though it had been, Irene Baxter had noticed the look of alarm and warning that had flashed into Mrs. Ashcombe's eyes as he spoke. That settled it then. Mrs. Ashcombe did not wish anyone to know where her daughter had lived during those past years.

Irene felt rather pleased with her day's work, as they motored back to Shadcombe in Mrs. Willie's two cars. She had picked up several scraps of information which seemed likely to be of use to her, and now Bobbie Tolhurst had unwittingly led Polly on to speak indiscreetly.

Her thoughts, stimulated perhaps by the keen moorland air as the car sped over Haldon and along the Exeter Road, worked rapidly. She was piecing together this and that fragment, and they all seemed to fit.

Those boot-prints in the cave corresponded, she felt sure, with a boot-print or two which she had come across accidentally in a remote part of the shrubbery at Gareth Cottage; she recollects distinctly the rather curious imprints made by the angles of the rows of nails. Ella Ashcombe had been strangled with a bit of twine, which the newspapers had spoken of as "tarred twine." The hank of cord in the cave had been tarred cord or twine. A bit of tallow candle had been found in the bundle discovered near Hole Head. That bundle, too, had been tied up with tarred twine, and she herself had found a bit of tallow candle amongst some scraps and rubbish at Gareth Cottage, and now, to-day, two tallow candles had been among the odds and ends in the cave they had just discovered. These things might be coincidences, but she did not believe they

were. Then Milo had said things during his interview with her in Oxford Street, when she had been disguised as a man with grey hair and a beard, which Grey had overheard, and had found coincided with certain incidents he knew to have occurred, which indirectly had bearing on the murder. Her meeting with Yvonne, the famous dancer, had been most fortunate too. It had come about through her opening that letter while she was with Milo at Torquay—oh, how she had detested those hours spent alone with him, she reflected, and his persistent attempts to make love to her against her will. And the things, the spiteful statements and blatant falsehoods he had said to her about Grey! And why? Merely because she had once happened to remark that she had liked Grey on the occasion she had met him at Mrs. Monckton's.

Liked him! Her train of thought shot out into a fresh channel. She felt sure that gradually, though slowly, Gerald was coming to like her in the way she so longed he should. Little things he had said to her during the past week, the way he had looked at her when he thought she did not see, the expression in his eyes, sometimes, when he had talked to her, all pointed in the direction she so desired.

Then she wondered why this should be. Had she changed? Had she grown better looking? Did she dress—why yes, perhaps, that had something to do with it, her boy's clothes. She had put on boy's clothes merely as a disguise, one of her many professional disguises, just as she sometimes dressed as an old woman, or as a flower-seller, as a fortune-teller, or as an old or a middle-aged man. Could it be that the costume she now wore attracted him, in some way piqued his fancy?

"You are smiling, Mr. Rawlins," Vera Trevor suddenly exclaimed. She was seated facing her. "A penny for your thoughts."

"I know I was," Irene answered, instantly on her guard. "I was thinking what you said about the camouflaged girl. What a dreadful shame it was though, to cut her off like that."

They all laughed.

"And she cried so at the funeral," the one sharp-tongued member of the picnic party said with a twisted mouth. "But then, of course, she had not heard the will read."

CHAPTER XII

THE BIG SPLASH

“Us won’t go home ’till *mor-ning*; us won’t go home ’till *mor-ning*; us won’t go home ’till *mor-or-nинг* . . .”

“A gude song, sonny, and well sung. Sing ’ut again —will ’ee?”

A certain hostelry in Holcombe was, as was usual on Saturday nights, well patronised. In the “private” bar, so-called probably on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, twelve or fifteen regular customers, mostly agricultural labourers, were assembled. The place reeked of alcohol, and the atmosphere was so thick with foul-smelling tobacco smoke, that to see right across the room, which was not a large one, was difficult. The impression a sober stranger peering in at the door would have carried away with him would have been a vision of fat, round, shiny red faces with eyes rendered bovine and watery through smoke and beer, looming out of a haze composed of a Scotch mist and London fog. It was not a nice place to be in, at least from the standpoint of any but its *habitués*.

As the singer, a yokel of three- or four-and-twenty, with unkempt hair and sun-tanned skin, sat down unsteadily on the bench from which he had risen to relieve himself of his feelings in fuddled song, he knocked over with his elbow a pewter pot, and its contents deluged the sawdust floor in a splashing cataract.

"Yew fule, yew, yew durned gert zany!" a rough, bearded man in a jerkin, corduroy trousers and heavy boots, shouted furiously, banging his fist upon the table. "Yew did zame t'other night! Yew'm mazed, ah reckon, that's what yew be!"

Though obviously a native, there was something about him which betokened him a sailor, or at least one who had been at sea. He was, indeed, the individual who on the day of the inquest on the murdered girl had stood muttering to himself whilst the coroner and his associates had filed out of the house.

The young labourer laughed loudly.

"An' did'n' I stan' 'ee 'nother t'other night, ole feller?" he exclaimed joyously. "Cors' I did, an' I'll stan' 'ee 'nother now, sure 'nuff—hi, muther! 'Nother quart o' fore 'arf ver Mister What-'s-name, will 'ee?"

Mollified, the man in corduroys held out a horny palm.

"That be well spoke, sonny," he said as he gripped the younger man's hand. "That's way tu du ut. That's way t'make friends, sonny. Yew'm one o' the rit' sort, yew be. I was like 'ee when I were yew'r age. An' now yew'll join me in this 'ere, awe yes yew will," and he too ordered another pot.

It was growing late, but none of the revellers was as yet too intoxicated to be incoherent. When the gentleman in corduroys had gulped heavily from his foaming tankard and wiped his lip with the back of his sleeve, he grew even more talkative, and better disposed than ever towards the young yokel.

"Ah seed widder an 'er darter this forenune," the latter remarked presently. "Er be a purty gurl, 'er be, no mistake."

His companion seemed suddenly roused.

"Awe, that er widder," he said aloud, but to himself. "Awe."

"Er've recovered summat, pore sawl," the other said, blinking.

"Ah knaws what Ah knaws, and Ah sees what Ah sees," his companion remarked sententiously, still speaking apparently to himself.

"Yew'm said that afore, ole feller, many times afore," one of the other yokels exclaimed, grinning.

"An A'll say un many times again," the old man answered snappishly.

Conversation flagged for some minutes. All were too busy with their pint or quart pots to talk much. Those who did talk rambled on inconsequently, speaking, it might have been noticed, each about himself only.

For some moments the old man had been staring at the wet floor.

"Wonnerful what a big splash a small pot like that du make," he said presently. "Like a lake out o' taycup ut 't be."

They all stared down at it. Certainly it seemed strange, as the sea-faring man had said, that a quart of beer upset upon the floor could cover so wide an area. It still ran in thin rivulets along the uneven boards, in spite of the layer of saw-dust.

About half an hour later the yokel said again that he had seen the widow and her daughter, but nobody seemed to recollect that he had said so before. This time he added, as an afterthought:

"Moast strange thing, that 'er tradg-tradg'dy down long. Moast strange thing."

Again the man in corduroys seemed to wake up. But now he sat silent.

The subject led to talk of other crimes, of murder

in particular. This crime and that was mentioned with allusions, a course, to the Crippen case. There had been a murder on Great Haldon once, near the old race-stand, but none present could remember it. Their fathers, however, could recollect it quite well, they told each other. The body had, it seemed, been discovered in some cave.

"Cave?"

The word had been muttered by the old man in corduroys. But that was all he said. He was very drunk now, and would soon be asleep.

And then, as was inevitable, the whole affair of the Holcombe Tragedy was talked out again. The talkers grew more and more loquacious, then argumentative. Names were mentioned freely. This view and that opinion was advanced as to who the actual murderer could be. Evidence given, and alleged to have been given, at the inquest, and printed in the Press, was quoted.

"An' that 'ere bundle found, an' letters in 'un," one of the least intoxicated of the talkers suddenly exclaimed. "What become of 'ee? 'Us bain't 'eard no more of 'ee. Ah doan't believe ther' wer' no bundle. 'Twas all them papers' 'trash.' "

"Awe, don't yew believe no such stuff an' nonsense," one of the others interrupted. "Ah knew all 'bout 'er. Ah knaws where 'er be tu."

The yokel who had upset the tankard was also fast asleep. He awoke slowly with a grunt, stretched himself, gave one prodigious yawn, then rose to his feet laboriously and looked stupidly about him. He lurched towards the group.

The talkers had lowered their voices. Now all were grouped in a listening attitude about the man who

had alleged that he knew what had become of that mysterious and much-talked-of bundle.

For some moments he continued speaking in a low tone: When at last he stopped, all who had been listening turned of one accord and stared as steadily as their befuddled wits would allow them to do at the deep-breathing form of the old man lying back on a chair with mouth agape and chin sunk upon his chest.

"Well, ah never!" one of them presently remarked.

"Us didn' never suspect '*ee* knawed much about 'un," observed another.

"Time, please, gentlemen!" came the strident voice of the portly female behind the bar. She had her sleeves rolled up beyond the elbow, and this, coupled with her flat nose and square jaw, gave her the appearance of a pugilist.

"Time, *please!*" she cried in a louder voice a minute later.

Slowly her patrons began to move unsteadily towards the door.

A clatter of lock and bolts followed.

Footsteps were coming up the narrow, steep lane, which leads by a short cut from Holcombe to Shadcombe. They were unsteady footsteps, as though whoever it might be had lost confidence in himself. As they approached the crest of the hill, the wayfarer broke into snatches of a song, in an alcoholic voice:

"Us won't go home till *mor-ning*. . . . go home till *mor-ning* . . . till *mor-or-ning* . . . daylight (*hic*) . . . appear"

He stopped, and there came a low whistle from further along the lane. The wayfarer whistled in re-

ply, and waited. Someone came towards him at a brisk walk. Some moments later they met.

"Have you been waiting long?" the "reveller" asked in a sober and quite different voice.

"Not above ten minutes. How marvellous you are, Irene! Your impersonations are amazing."

"They have to be. Oh, what a night! And how horrible men are! Can you be surprised after what I have seen of men since I adopted this profession that I always thought it impossible I could ever admire any man—until I met you?"

"Was it very terrible?"

"Worse than last Saturday, much worse. But my trick came off all right. I again upset a pot of beer on to the floor, and managed to empty my own mug on to it every time it was filled, without being seen. They were all too fuddled. They did wonder once how a single pot of ale could make so big a splash; but I suppose the idea of anyone deliberately wasting the precious liquid would have seemed to them so incredible as to be impossible. How lovely it is to be in the fresh air again! Oh, I think men as a race are detestable, all ranks and all classes. I will tell you one day some of the things I have seen. I couldn't repeat to you many things I have heard, such coarse, horrible talk!"

He saw she was overwrought, and he took her gently by the arm. Thus they walked for some way in silence.

It was a sultry night, without a breath of wind. The moon shed a streak of molten gold far out to sea, and into the streak, as they stood at a gate, gazing out across the water, a tiny barque at that moment floated. A night bird screeched. In the long meadow grass, grasshoppers chirped unceasingly. The

only discordant sound was the voices of the yokels quarrelling in broad Devonshire as they made their way homewards. Presently that sound grew more and more distant. Soon it was inaudible, and the very trees and bushes seemed to sleep.

They stood there without speaking. Somehow the beauty of the night seemed to cast a spell upon them. At last Grey turned, and looked hard at his companion, whose artificially sun-tanned face showed oddly in the moonlight beneath her tousled hair.

"Irene, do for goodness' sake take that awful wig off," Grey exclaimed suddenly. "You can't think what you look like."

She smiled. Then she removed her yokel's cap, and after it the wig. Her hair, wound closely about her head in heavy coils, was not becoming.

"I wonder," she said after some moments' pause, "if you would mind my loosing my hair. It is so uncomfortable like this, but with a wig I have to wear it so."

"Why, certainly," he answered. "Why not let it right down?"

With deft fingers she loosened it, then unwound the thick coils.

"Shall I unplait them for you?" he said all at once, and, without waiting for a reply, set to work.

She stood facing the sea with its golden streak, her folded arms now resting upon the gate. The little boat was still in sight. Behind her, Grey unravelled, slowly, the long ropes of hair. To his touch it felt like silk. He lingered, smoothing out the soft tresses. Now his task was almost done

Something impelled him to bend forward. He lifted the great mass that he had loosened, and pressed it

to his lips. He heard Irene catch her breath. And then, all at once, placing his arms about her from behind, he drew her to him and, burying his face in the wonderful hair, kissed her many times.

Presently she half-turned. Now the moon's rays shone down upon her hair, which reached almost to her waist. Never had he beheld hair so wonderful, so beautiful. It looked like burnished bronze, shot with gold and auburn. The sight and touch of it stimulated, intoxicated him. Suddenly he took her in his arms and covered her face with kisses.

A cloud, drifting sluggishly across the sky, obscured the moon slowly. When it shone out again, Gerald Grey and Irene Baxter still stood locked in each other's arms.

A nearby sound, startled them. Irene sprang away and Grey turned quickly.

Outlined in the moonlight a man stood facing them. They could not see his features. Presently he spoke, and they recognised his voice.

"A charming moonlight idyll," he said in a sneering tone.

It was Octavius Milo.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STRANGER IN IRELAND

"So," Milo went on in the same tone, "your old school chum turns out to be a girl dressed as a boy. I never had a high opinion of you, Grey, but upon my word, this beats cock-fighting!"

He had a cigarette between his lips, and now lit it. Then he looked hard at Irene Baxter, whose face was in the shadow.

"I can't see your friend distinctly," he said, "but I recognised her voice at once. I suppose you know, Grey, or maybe you don't, that the woman you are with is a doubtful character. Not long ago, she told me a rigmarole about her dead husband, and said her name was Lethbridge—Mrs. Cyril Lethbridge. Good heavens, what vipers women are!"

With a supreme effort Grey controlled himself. Then he answered with assumed calmness:

"You don't know what you are talking about Milo. Unfortunately there are reasons why I cannot enlighten you."

"Oh, don't talk such stuff, Grey!" Milo exclaimed, losing his temper. "What is the good of trying to bluff me? What I have told you is what happened; but I suppose you are so infatuated that you can't bear to hear it. What beats me is why your precious companion should wear boy's clothes. I suppose she knows that, in doing so she runs a considerable risk?"

He stopped and stared again at the figure in the shadow. Grey, glancing at her, saw that Irene looked disconcerted, almost frightened. It was the first time he had seen fear in her eyes. All the while, however, her brain was working rapidly.

Suddenly Milo continued:

"For a long time past, Grey," he said, "I have had one up against you. And I have one up against this woman, because I imagined her to be on the Continent. She told me, when I met her at Torquay, that she was going to France to visit friends. That was weeks ago. She disappeared out of my sight, and I wondered what had become of her. I had begun to think some mishap must have befallen her, and I was foolish enough to worry about it. Now let me tell you," his voice grew threatening, "that I am going to get even with both of you at once. I have only to tell Mrs. Jacob Mulhall about this escapade of yours and it will be all over the town, and half the county in a day or two. I need hardly remind you," he ended, "that a scandal of this description is not likely to increase your popularity, especially after what has already happened."

"I think you won't say a word to Mrs. Mulhall, or to anybody else."

It was Irene who spoke now. She was quite self-possessed. She had come out of the shadow and the moonlight revealed her face.

Milo looked astonished at the interruption.

"By this time to-morrow," he said sharply to her, "you will know you were mistaken."

"I think not. Will you let me speak?"

"Oh, say anything you like," he answered with a shrug.

"You have just spoken about a 'scandal,'" she remarked. "You are a lawyer, too, so that a scandal would equally affect your 'popularity,' in other words, injure you professionally. Now, supposing it became known, Mr. Milo, that you secretly visited America, and then it became known beyond dispute that you had cunningly swindled a client in your professional capacity, and that you went even so far as to——"

With an oath Milo had sprang forward and was trying to put his hand over his accuser's mouth. In the moonlight his cheeks and lips were ashen, his eyes fiery.

"Who, I ask you, has told you all that?" he cried. "It is all lies, every word. You cannot prove anything."

"Don't you think Miss Yvonne could? And what about Mr. Wal Marner? He is in England now."

He stood like an animal at bay.

"Who are you?" he suddenly gasped. "Have you been spying on me, or what? How is it you know so much about me?"

"That is my affair," she looked at Grey, "our affair. Now, Mr. Milo, as we have placed each other in check, I propose a compromise. If you remain silent, really and absolutely silent, I promise to divulge nothing I know about you. Is it a bargain?"

For a minute he did not speak. Restlessly he walked a few yards away into the darkness, wrestling with his thoughts. Presently he came back.

"Well?" Irene asked. "Have you decided?"

"Let it be a compromise," he said sullenly. "I have no option—at present . . . ?"

"That is reasonable of you. Then we will say good night, Mr. Milo. Just one question before you go. Did

you follow us up into these lanes, or did you come upon us by accident? Do you mind saying?"

"By accident," he answered in a much quieter tone. "I am staying near Cross Park for a day or two, and it was such a fine night I thought I would take a stroll before going to bed."

His anger seemed to have evaporated. In reality he was finessing.

It was nearly two in the morning before Grey and Irene Baxter reached Shadcombe. The moon had sunk into a cloud-bank, and the night had turned dark. Rain seemed suddenly to threaten. The darkness came opportunely, for, though the girl had swept her hair under her jacket and so concealed it, yet, without her wig, she might have been recognised had any acquaintance passed her by in the light of a street-lamp. Milo did not sleep that night. At dawn he still lay wide awake, striving to evolve some plan by which he might avenge himself. But none, out of the many which suggested themselves, seemed feasible. For a long time, too, he wondered how the girl had become possessed of this secret knowledge about himself. Who was she? Who could she be? And when and where had Grey first met her? And how intimate were she and Grey? Last, but not least, what induced her to disguise herself as a boy? The whole thing puzzled him exceedingly. That there must be some mystery at the bottom of it all, he felt sure. But what could the mystery be? And what part did Grey, indeed did he himself, play in it?

The whole of North Wall from Alexandra Basin to the L. and N. W. Railway terminus, and from the North-Eastern Railway, past Liberty Hall to O'Con-

nell's Bridge and Sackville Street, in Dublin, was alive with traffic. No notice was taken of the surroundings by a thick-set, middle-aged man of striking appearance, who, just arrived from England by the steam packet, stood watching his hand-baggage being stacked on to a jaunting-car.

As the car rattled noisily over the cobble-stones in the wake of other cars and cabs, strange memories filled the mind of the new arrival. Just thirty years had passed since he had last been in those streets. Yet it seemed to him as though he had been there only yesterday. He had been an urchin in those days, selling newspapers and matches, barefooted, clothed in rags, begging, stealing, snatching a livelihood as best he could.

And now he was a rich man! A little later he tossed a shilling to a street arab, whom an overbearing commissionaire had cursed for "distressing the gentleman," then entered an hotel, registered his name and inquired for letters.

There were several awaiting him, and he took them.

The smoking-room was crowded, so he went up to his bedroom. There, when his luggage had come up, he locked the door. Not until then did he proceed to tear open the letters, two of which were registered.

His smile was sardonic as he refolded them all and placed them in his breast-pocket.

"Say," he exclaimed aloud in a tone of self-satisfaction, "there are no flies on Wal Marner—yet."

He visited the Bank of Ireland next morning, opened an account there, then caught the three o'clock train from Kingsbridge to Portarlington.

More memories crowded in upon him as he sat staring out of the windows of his first-class compartment

at the broad stretches of rich pasture rushing past on either side.

How different from that journey from Portarlington to Dublin more than thirty years ago. He had not noticed the landscape then. He had not been able to. He had travelled part-way hidden in a cattle-truck, part-way in an empty guard's-van, while the last fourteen miles he had covered on foot, sleeping one night in an empty fowl-house where an irate gamekeeper's son had caught and soundly thrashed him.

The station at Portarlington, when he alighted from his slip coach, he did not recognise. The primitive structure he remembered had been swept away. In its place stood a station with stone-flagged platform, a footbridge and other up-to-date improvements.

After driving eight miles, he told the jarvey to pull up.

"Stop here till I come back," he said. He had been conversing with the man all the way along, and had asked him many questions.

"And is it here your honour will be after wanting me to wait for him?" the jarvey asked as he stepped down.

"Right here, Pat! Get a drink meanwhile," and he pushed a coin into his hand.

The man "hoped the good God would bless him," then clambered back to his seat.

A mile further on, Marner came to a stile, and stood gazing beyond it. Presently his heart sank.

His old home, the home where his life had been so miserable that he had finally run away from it, had vanished. On its site stood a cottage of brick instead of cobb, with slates in place of thatch. It looked neat and clean and new. The dirty little garden where he

had so often played—and suffered—was a trim, well-kept plot with vegetables growing in it. The pump was there still, but a newly-painted pump, and the old cask which had done duty as a dog kennel

He walked down the cindered footpath to the little garden gate, opened it and went up to the house. Rather a sour-looking English peasant woman opened the door.

“Does anybody named ‘Marner’ live here now?” he inquired.

“No, certainly not,” the woman snapped. “I live here, and my husband.”

“There used to be people named ‘Marner’ living here.”

“It must have been long ago then. I and my husband have been here nine years, and the folk here before were not called by that name.”

“This is still the Rath estate?”

The woman laughed.

“Indeed it is nothing of the kind,” she exclaimed, “This is our own place. We bought it.”

“Oh!”

Marner paused. So this was his home-coming! Though his childhood had been so wretched here, he had looked forward, somehow, to returning one day to his old home. A few happy memories of his childhood he could recall, but very few.

He had lived a hard life afterwards, and made his way unhelped, had endured many a hard knock, and many a bitter disappointment. But in all his life—the life of a roving adventurer in the United States—no blow had hit him as hard as the death, in his childhood, of the nondescript dog, Jock.

“Is there anything you want?”

The acid voice brought him back to earth.

"No. Sorry. Say, yes, there is. I'm an Amurri-can, ma'am. I'm moving around here, picking up souvenirs and bits of curios and so on, and I'd like to have that old gate of yours, I suppose it's yours I came through, the one with the moss on it. You'll sell it to me, I guess."

The woman looked him up and down.

"My husband might—at a price. It's a good gate."

"A good gate," he laughed. "Sure. I'll give you five dollars for it, and a new gate. Five dollars is one pound."

"I know that. I shall have to ask my husband."

"Say, I can't hang around till your husband comes along. So you won't sell. I'm sorry," and he made a move to go.

"Wait—stop a minute," she called out.

"I can't; good-afternoon."

"Oh, well," she went on quickly, "I suppose I may let you have the gate. You will pay me now?"

He produced the money and asked for a receipt. She grudgingly gave him one.

"When shall I get the new gate?" she asked.

"When I come to take the old one. That will be right away—to-morrow or next day. Good-afternoon."

She watched him stride away up the little path.

"And just as George was ordering a new gate," she murmured. "I'll keep this for myself," she glanced down at the money, "and say, that man is giving us a new gate in exchange for the old one. I wish only he'd not been in such a hurry. He would have paid more for it, I'm sure."

CHAPTER XIV

THE FLAME

HORACE wrote: "Make money, honestly if you can—but make it."

Wal Marner had never heard of Horace, but he had made money all his life, honestly when he could, because then he ran less risk of getting into trouble, dishonestly when he could not, because it was in him to go on making money, and he had no dislike of taking risks when the prize to be gained seemed worth while.

Since the days when he had sold newspapers in the streets of Dublin, and occasionally filched a purse and sometimes "won" a meal and not infrequently begged, generally successfully, of benevolent women and old gentlemen, he had "earned" money in a multitude of ways. He had run a gambling-saloon in Sacramento and floated companies in Detroit and Chicago and other cities until those places had become too hot to hold him, and dealt in horses and in cattle in Wyoming and Nebraska, and acted as courier and guide to parties of sightseers from many parts of Europe who wished to visit Yellowstone and Banff and Yosemite, and beauty spots in Colorado, such as Pike's Peak.

He had had great good luck and much bad luck. Upon the whole the good luck had preponderated, especially as he had never once during the whole of his career been actually laid by the heels. Several times

he had come near serving a term of imprisonment, but on each occasion a trump card had turned up at the last moment, and he had been allowed to go scot-free.

In some respects he was a philosopher; he never let misfortune worry him. Worry, he told himself, did nobody any good and might bring harm. If he blundered, a thing he rarely did, he was ready to face the consequences. He had first met Octavius Milo some years before the time when this story opens, while the young lawyer was travelling in the Western States and the two, recognising that they were birds of a feather, though on different social planes, had presently become intimate and eventually engineered one or two highly successful financial *coups* by which each had profited substantially. Marner had also become acquainted with Bobbie Tolhurst while the latter was roving the world. He had acted as Bobbie's guide on two occasions when Bobbie was eager to see life.

The side of life he had shown him in such cities as New York, Philadelphia and St. Louis, had not perhaps been of an elevating nature, but they had interested Tolhurst and afforded him food for thought. Marner, too, had in a way appealed to Tolhurst, beneath whose debonair manner lay an artistic and serious nature. There was something rough, and strong, and fearless and reckless about Marner, which he liked and could not help admiring. Tolhurst had, indeed, summed him up accurately the first time he had met him. In spite of his rough exterior and the complete lack of principle or of morals he possessed, Tolhurst instinctively felt, a touch of sentiment somewhere. That he had not been mistaken in this, Marner's memory of his old home, and his purchase of the old gate upon which in childhood he had hacked his name prove.

And now Wal Marner had returned to Great Britain with the intention of never leaving it again. He had made his pile, a very large pile. He was proud of having made it, as he had reason to be. But he never cared to dwell long upon the methods he had sometimes employed in "earning" it. He knew that by rights he ought to be in jail, instead of a gentleman at large whom common people, hearing how rich he was, were inclined to look up to with respect. One firm resolve he had made. Now that he had amassed his pile he meant to live a "straight" life and become a respectable citizen. He wanted a calm existence in place of the tumultuous one he had been forced to live for nearly thirty years.

A week after Marner's disappointing visit to his old home in Ireland, there was quite a stir in the little bar-parlour of a certain hotel, facing the sea at Shadcombe, when a rugged, "hard-bitten," broad-chested man, still in the prime of life, to judge by his appearance, sauntered in and looked about him. He gave a cordial nod to the assembled company collectively, sat down on the only vacant big chair, and called for the waiter.

"Say now, all you boys!" he exclaimed, waiving his arm to embrace them all, "What is it to be?"

His breezy manner was infectious. Any other stranger coming in like that and adopting such a tone might have met with a rebuff, or, at the least have been received in silence. Wal Marner's personality overcame that. His manner was entirely natural to him, and a man who is entirely natural rarely gives offence.

In the room were six or eight men. The proprietor of the two local journals was unfolding a plan for a bazaar for some charitable object. There was a cheery

fellow with a curious voice, interested in shipping, who generally had good stories to tell of his frequent voyages to Iceland.

Marner had not been more than a minute in their company when two rather young men who had been conversing together, addressed him almost simultaneously:

"Wal Marner, surely," Bobbie Tolhurst said, coming towards him with extended hand. "We met last in Jersey City, several years ago—do you remember?"

"Do I remember? Do I not!"

He had Tolhurst's hand in so hearty a grip that the young man swore beneath his breath at the pain the squeeze caused him.

"Then you may remember me, too?"

The second speaker was Milo. The instant Marner heard his voice, he looked up sharply. The way he shook Milo's hand was different. The greeting, though outwardly cordial, lacked enthusiasm and spontaneity.

"Say, that's me all over," Marner said a moment later. "Wherever I go, I don't care where it is, I meet men I know. You living here, Milo?"

"No, in Exeter."

"Ah, I remember." He looked hard at him. "I remember you some," he continued. "Remember you too much, maybe," and he gave an odd laugh. "Well, boys, glad to meet you all, and here's good fortune and pretty wives."

They drank in silence. The trim maid behind the bar looked at them with interest. Something about the stranger seemed to please her.

Conversation became general, but interest centred round the newcomer. His opinion upon this and that was asked, and usually deferred to. He seemed to have

been everywhere, and have seen everything outside Europe. Of Europe, and of England in particular, he appeared to know little. The questions he asked relating to the Old Country would, coming from anybody else, have evoked amusement.

He was interested in the town; that was clear. The proprietor of the local journals was the first to notice this, and scenting an asset to the place, engaged him in conversation. When presently they stopped talking, it was the stranger who had picked the brains of the local resident, and not, as is usual, the editor who had absorbed the other's views.

"Say—does a Mrs. Ashcombe live hereabouts?" Marner asked suddenly. He rapped his knuckles on the table to attract the attention of the waiter. "Pleasant looking woman, with a daughter: daughter name of Ella."

This awkward questioned silenced everybody. Milo was the first to speak.

"She lives near here," he said, "at a village a little way off. You know her?"

"I should say so. I met her in the States."

"Long ago?"

"Oh, I met her and her daughter more than once. Pleasant woman."

"Her daughter is dead, the one you mean."

"So? Then it's true she was murdered."

Again all were silent.

He asked a few more questions, then the conversation changed, and eventually he retired.

Before going to bed that night he wrote a brief letter, addressing it to Yvonne.

"I don't feel like bed yet, do you?" Tolhurst said,

as he walked with Milo along the Den. "Supposing we take a stroll along the sea wall."

Milo assented. He and Tolhurst were not exactly friends, but Tolhurst had never had reason actually to dislike him. There were few people he did dislike, being of that happy temperament which enables some men to adapt themselves to the moods and idiosyncrasies of the people they happen to be with. Milo was not a man in whom he would have cared to place great confidence, he instinctively felt, but as a casual acquaintance he was as inoffensive as the generality of men he had occasion to mix with.

They talked a good deal about Marner, as they walked along the wall. Somehow Tolhurst felt that his companion was all the time trying to draw him out to say what he knew about the stranger, and this set him on his guard. Why should Milo want to know so much about Marner, he wondered once or twice. And in what way had he and Marner been associated in America? He gathered, from one or two remarks Milo had let drop, that the two were rather intimately acquainted, and that they had, or had had, dealings together of some nature.

"Curious his having met the Ashcombes in America," Tolhurst presently observed. "I wonder how he came to hear, out in the States, of the way Ella Ashcombe met her death?"

"Oh, news of that sort gets about," Milo answered carelessly. "I wonder what his relations with the Ashcombes were."

"How do you mean 'relations'?"

"He didn't speak of her as a casual acquaintance at all: didn't you notice that? Spoke more as if he had known them many years."

"Perhaps he has. Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anyway, it is odd we should all meet in a one-horse place like this, after meeting in America. Should you say it is a coincidence?"

"What else do you imply?"

"I don't imply anything. All the same, as I have reason to know, Wal Marner rarely acts without some definite end in view."

"Such as?"

"How can I say? But do you mean to tell me a man like that drifts into a place like this without a reason? You are not as astute as I thought you were."

Bobbie Tolhurst laughed, and lit a fresh cigar.

"I lay no claim to astuteness," he said. "I leave keen wits to lawyers like yourself. By the way, how long is Miss Yvonne likely to stay in Shadcombe?"

"How in the world should I know?" Milo exclaimed almost tartly. "You had better ask her. I have noticed that she interests you."

"One is naturally interested in a charming woman of whom one knows nothing," Tolhurst answered lightly. "Yes, I am interested in her. And I should like to see her dance. I am told her performance is wonderful."

"If the antics of an erotic contortionist appeal to you, you certainly would think her wonderful."

"Then you have seen her dance? You never told me that. Where was it?

Milo bit his lip.

"In America," he said shortly.

"Did you meet here there socially?"

Tolhurst waited impatiently for the reply. After a moment's pause, Milo answered:

“No.”

This Tolhurst knew to be a lie. Yvonne had told him only the day before that she had met Milo, though she had not said where. She had added that she had no great wish to meet him again, and had asked Bobbie not to tell Milo that she had said she knew him.

They were standing on Splash Point, a projection into the sea half-way along the sea wall. From it, in the daytime, Gareth Cottage could be seen. They had their backs to the cliff and to the cottage which stood upon it. When, after talking a little longer, they turned with the intention of going home, both uttered an exclamation.

Though every other house was in darkness, and therefore invisible, for the night was dark, the windows of Gareth Cottage were brilliantly lit up.

Tolhurst looked at his watch.

“And it is past one o’clock,” he said.

They stood watching the cottage nestling in the high valley in a cleft between the cliffs, for some moments. Then, all at once, a red and yellow flame shot up into the blackness, followed quickly by another.

“It’s on fire!” Tolhurst exclaimed.

CHAPTER XV

YVONNE'S IDEA

By the time Tolhurst and Milo arrived at Gareth Cottage, the whole house was ablaze. Half an hour later, when the fire was beginning to die down, fire-engines, drawn by attenuated cab horses, at a slow canter, came down the hill from Shadcombe and the hill from Dawlish almost simultaneously; at that time the engines and the fire appliances that these towns boasted were wonderful and fearsome contrivances.

Fortunately no lives had been lost, but nearly all Mrs. Ashcombe's belongings had been destroyed. Mrs. Ashcombe herself, Polly, the cook, and Charlotte the maid, had taken refuge in a neighbour's house.

When Tolhurst found Mrs. Ashcombe and was about to express sympathy, he was astonished at her self-possession. Polly was greatly upset, and the cook and Charlotte remained hysterical for some time.

"After all," Mrs. Ashcombe said, as she lay back in an arm-chair, sipping a glass of sherry, "it is not as though the cottage were not insured. Indeed, indirectly, we shall benefit, for it was insured up to the hilt, and I had nothing of great value there."

"Have you any idea how the fire originated?" Milo asked.

"None. The grates were all old, so perhaps a wooden beam at the back of one of them became ignited. That happens sometimes in old houses. The fire broke out

apparently in the dining-room. We had a fire lit there this evening, as the air was chilly."

While she talked, Polly kept looking at her oddly. Her face wore the same expression as on that night her mother had fainted in the drawing-room.

But she made no comment.

And on the following afternoon, when Grey went to see the Ashcombes, Mrs. Ashcombe was quite cheerful. He, too, was surprised. Upon his return to Shadcombe he mentioned this to Irene Baxter, who was staying at an hotel with her "half-sister," Madame Yvonne. Milo had kept his part of the bargain made with Irene Baxter, and had spoken no word about the discovery he had made that night in the lane.

"I have no doubt whatever," she said bluntly, when Grey stopped speaking, "that the fire was started by Mrs. Ashcombe herself, and intentionally. But of course you must not hint that I think that."

"Why should she have started it?"

"I will tell you later on. I told you once, if you remember, that Gareth Cottage had twelve chimneys, but only eleven rooms. I noticed that the first day I was cook there. Chimneys are not put up as ornaments, you know. Now I have just been told that during the fire a room nobody had ever known existed, became disclosed. My informant was Vera Trevor, who, as you know, is a matter-of-fact little person not addicted to drawing upon her imagination. She was motoring from Exeter with Mrs. Monckton when the fire broke out, and they saw the whole conflagration. She says the room was a small one, and that it adjoined the one in which the crime was committed. I tried to find out where it lay, when I was in the house, but never could."

This discovery set Grey thinking, and all Shadcombe and the neighbourhood talking. It seemed that when the fire was at its height, a partitioning wall had suddenly collapsed, revealing several rooms, one of which, the "mystery-room," contained a lot of piled-up sacks filled with something—of course nobody could guess what—a complete suit of armour, some halberds, a heavy-looking table, apparently old oak, and several Chippendale chairs. That was all that could be discerned through the smoke, though the story got about that some curious-looking apparatus had also been seen in the room before the floor crashed down, and hurled the lot into a fiery furnace amid what resembled, as the local paper said next day, "a volcanic eruption of sparks."

Mrs. Ashcombe and Polly took rooms in the leading hotel in Shadcombe, being temporarily without a home. It thus came about that Yvonne and Irene Baxter, the latter still masquerading as a boy and still believed to be Grey's old school chum, "Frank Rawlins," in a few days became very friendly with the Ashcombes, and that Wal Marner, as a former acquaintance of the Ashcombes, renewed his acquaintanceship.

It was Yvonne who, some days after the fire, one day suggested, while they were all lunching together, that a visit should be paid to the scene of the fire.

"How can we tell," she said with her pretty laugh, "that we may not come upon some of Mrs. Ashcombe's valuables amongst the débris?"

She turned to Mrs. Ashcombe.

"Is it not true," she said in the candid way she had of talking, which was so charming, "that some of your jewellery was swallowed up in the fire?"

Mrs. Ashcombe gave a little shrug.

"Oh, not anything of consequence," she answered with assumed indifference. "I never had much jewellery. It does not appeal to me."

"That is the first time," Marner put in, laughing broadly, "I have ever heard a woman say that jewellery didn't appeal to her. Say, I think Miss Yvonne's idea is a good one. Shall we do it?"

Mrs. Ashcombe did not seem anxious to, but as the rest apparently wanted to, she fell in with the idea.

The place they found desolate enough. Nothing had been touched since the fire, and what had been a pretty, old-world cottage was now a heap of grey dust and charred timbers, with only the outer walls standing.

One of the most interested in the search appeared to be Frank Rawlins. He separated himself from the rest of the party soon after they arrived, and proceeded to poke about amongst the blackened embers with his stick, prodding a pile of ashes here, pushing over a blackened beam there, the while apparently engrossed in what he was doing. Once or twice Mrs. Ashcombe glanced at him curiously. Finally she called out, partly in fun, though she sounded a little annoyed:

"Do you really think, Mr. Rawlins, that you will find anything? Because I don't."

Almost as she spoke he bent down, thrust his arm under some débris almost up to the elbow, then straightened himself again and called out:

"But I have found something."

In his hand he held a small metal crucifix. About eight inches long, the cross was elaborately engraved. The figure was made of brass. This, however, was not apparent until afterwards. Now, as he looked at it,

both cross and figure resembled a bit of metal that has been heated in a fire and allowed to cool.

"You had better take it, Mrs. Ashcombe," he said, holding it out to her.

But Polly, who was nearer to him, stretched out her hand.

"Why, mother," she exclaimed, examining the crucifix, "whose is this? I don't remember ever seeing it before."

Mrs. Ashcombe took it from her.

"Nor I," she said rather awkwardly, after scrutinising it for some minutes.

"Say, it may have been in that room nobody knew was there," Marner observed tactlessly.

No one noticed the slight flush that at once spread over Mrs. Ashcombe's face—except Polly. And, she wondered again, as she had so often wondered before. Without a doubt, she told herself, there was something about Mrs. Ashcombe that she could not understand.

That was all that Irene Baxter, or anybody else, found, though they continued their search for over half an hour.

As they all walked homeward along the sea wall, Marner was inspecting the crucifix, which he held near his face, when he suddenly said:

"Do you value this greatly, Mrs. Ashcombe?"

"I don't value it at all," she answered, smiling.

"Then, may I buy it off you?"

"Buy it? Don't be so silly, Mr. Marner. Keep it, I don't want it."

"That is very kind of you. Then I will keep it," and he slipped it into his pocket. As he did so, his eyes and Yvonne's met. There seemed to be some secret

understanding between them. Irene noticed the quick glance, but kept her own counsel. There was little she did not notice.

Wal Marner had engaged a suite of rooms at the hotel. It consisted of a bedroom, a sitting-room and a bathroom. In the hall, when they all returned from their visit to the scene of the fire, Marner stood a little away apart with Yvonne.

"I've ordered supper for two in my sitting-room to-night at ten o'clock," he said in a quick undertone. "I have something important to say to you. Will you come?"

She glanced to right and left. There was no one within earshot.

"Yes," she answered. "But nobody must know."

"Nobody will know."

During the *tête-à-tête* meal, Marner, usually so self-possessed and so talkative, was singularly silent. Also he seemed embarrassed, almost bored. He kept crumbling his bread in his fingers, and his conversation was at times *banal*. Yvonne could not make it out. Herself in high spirits and vivacious as ever, she tried to draw him out and make him sociable. Her attempts proved futile.

When supper had been cleared away, and they were again alone, she blew a cloud of cigarette smoke towards the ceiling, then said suddenly:

"I thought you had something important to say to me."

"I have," he answered without looking at her. "Something very important."

"Of a commercial nature, I suppose! Or has it to do with *the crime*?"

"Oh, don't talk like that!" he exclaimed. "Matters

of that sort will keep. I have something more important, much more important, to say to you, Yvonne."

He faced her suddenly, his eyes ablaze.

"Can't you guess?"

She pursed her lips, and gave a little shrug, then seemed to peep at him shyly from beneath her long lashes.

"You are not going to ask me to marry you, surely?"

She was laughing now, and when she laughed she was bewitching. Her small, extraordinarily white teeth showed in even rows.

"*I am!* But don't laugh like that, Yvonne. I can't bear it. I do ask you to marry me. You can't conceive how I have come to love you, how I do adore you. You know what I am. I know what you are. We have both led pretty desperate lives, if I may put it like that. We both know the world, in the broadest sense, and our lives have in some respects been similar."

In the stress of his emotion his mode of expression had changed. He no longer spoke in the least like an American.

"If you will marry me," he leant forward towards her in his chair and spoke in a lower voice. "If you will marry me I will settle the whole of my fortune on you. Now you know whether I love you really or not!"

"In other words, you offer me spot cash if I will sell myself to you."

She was teasing him, as a cat teases a mouse. It may have been her rather feline nature that made her enjoy watching this great, strong man, who had carved his way up in life from the gutter to the topmost rung, metaphorically writhe. She remembered the occasion when he had sent for her after her performance at

the Midway Plaisance, and how frightened she had inwardly felt when he had threatened her that night. The tables were turned, now.

"Are you sure it is not because I may be of use to you—you told me once, remember, that you envied me the gift I have of 'imitating' handwritings—that you want to have me completely in your power?"

"Please, please, don't talk like that," he burst out, suddenly standing up. He took a step towards her. Then with a quick movement he placed both hands upon her shoulders and held her firmly. She winced under the grip, then, throwing back her head, stared up into his eyes. She no longer smiled, or pretended to look sly, or had recourse to the outwardly meaningless, though in reality significant, coquetry which some moments before she had affected. After a short silence she said, in a deeply earnest tone:

"Is that the truth, Wal Marner? Is it possible that any man, that you of all men, can really have come to regard me in that way after the lives we have both led?"

Suddenly she burst out laughing. Her laughter sounded metallic and hysterical, almost harsh. It ceased abruptly.

"Look here, Wal Marner," she exclaimed in a low, tense tone, "if you are fooling me, as dozens of men have tried to do, some successfully—ah, how I curse them for it!—by heaven, you shall regret it. If I dared let myself go, let my heart expand, if I dared give rein to my soul where you are concerned—ah, but no, no, I don't and won't trust any man, least of all you, Wal Marner, with your record. You think I don't know? I could tell you things I know about you that you wouldn't dream I know. Love!"

Do you know how a strong woman loves—how *I* love? Ah, if only I could trust you . . . if only . . . if only . . . ”

In her agitation she too had risen to her feet. She was trembling all over, pale as death, her lips slightly parted, her breath coming fast as her bosom rose and fell.

She was a woman of marvellously strong character—resolute, fearless. She was a woman who from girlhood had crushed her better nature, her fine, generous instincts, because almost from childhood she had seen around her naught but evil and sin, hypocrisy and vice of every sort. It was in her nature to be trustful and confiding, but that was all long since dead, strangled at its inception, and in its place had grown up cunning and mistrust and deceit and wickedness.

For some moments they stood there looking at each other, each striving to fathom the other's deepest thoughts. Neither spoke. They were two strong natures, two powerful personalities brought suddenly to bay. The man longed for this woman as never, throughout the whole of his varied and adventurous life, had he longed for anything.

And the woman? She, too, loved for the first time in her life, but for the moment her head was stronger than her heart. She yearned, with an intensity she did not as yet realise, to open her heart to him, and offer to become his slave. But her knowledge of life, knowledge which had been so bitter, steeled her will, prevented her trusting him, urged her to be cautious.

A fearful struggle waged within her. It was a battle between good and evil, between her better judgment and her better nature, between love and prudence. Should she cast prudence aside, once again? Should

she once more take the risk of being fooled and cast aside? What would one disappointment, one disillusionment more or less matter? Ah, but all the others did not count. They had only bruised her heart, bruised and sometimes lacerated it, perhaps. But if this man should prove to be no better than the rest, should turn out an impostor and a liar

She could not bear to think about what would happen to her then. Her heart would be broken, her spirit crushed. Her strong nature had enabled her to bear hard blows and recover from them in time; but when such a nature is struck down it can never rise again.

Suddenly she spoke:

"Wal Marner," she said, steadyng her voice, "I don't know if I can trust you. Women have insight into men's characters, but my insight cannot fathom yours. To-night I am going to take my fate in both hands. I meant, I had vowed, never in life to trust another man. But I am going to trust you, Wal Marner; why, I do not know, except that I love you. What I am doing now may mean little enough to you. It means everything to me."

She covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of weeping. As she did so, she felt his arms suddenly close around her.

"My love," she heard him murmur, "if I am not telling you the truth, if I ever go back on one word of what I have promised, and I promise you again now that I will make you the happiest woman on earth, so far as I have the power to——"

CHAPTER XVI

MARNER THE MYSTERIOUS

THE people of Ireland and of the West of England have much in common. They are hospitable, sensitive, highly strung. Incidentally they are quick to resent an insult, and anything approaching injustice stirs all their worst passions.

The people of Newfoundland are practically all of Irish or of West Country descent. Years ago, Irish men and women, and natives of Devon, Somerset and Cornwall, and of the south-western counties of Wales, emigrated to Newfoundland and Labrador in their thousands to pursue the fishing industry. Thus it comes that to-day a great part of the population of Newfoundland speaks with a strong brogue, though neither these people nor their parents have ever been in Ireland. They have inherited, too, the good qualities and the faults of their forefathers, with the result that Newfoundlanders are among the most genial and hospitable folk to be found on one side of the Atlantic.

Just before the time of this story a saucy little craft called *The Bruce* plied to and fro between St. John's, Newfoundland, and the coast of Nova Scotia. In winter her voyages were slow and laborious, due to the ice-floes, which greatly impeded her progress. St. John's Harbour is not unlike the mouth of the River Dart, at Dartmouth. On either side a steep mountain

slope curves down to St. John's harbour, in summer a picturesque vista. St. John's itself is built upon the north side of the river, a single street encircling it. There then were few hotels, and poor ones at that, but there were many hotel-boarding-houses which visitors patronised largely. Towering high above all other buildings is the Roman Catholic Cathedral, which in winter is warmed weekly by the united breath of at least ten thousand worshippers, of whom the great majority are men. For the people of Newfoundland are a deeply religious race, superstitious, maybe, to some extent, owing to beliefs inherited from their forbears.

To-day the seal-fishing industry is one of the most flourishing in Newfoundland. Annually, in winter, a large fleet of trawlers puts out to sea, then gradually spreads out in many different directions. Ships remain at sea for weeks, sometimes for months at a time, and when they return to port there is feasting and thanksgiving. But during their long absence horrible cruelty is enacted.

When the seals have been sighted, baby seals for the most part and therefore at the mercy of the sealers, every attempt is made to cut them off from the water as they lie unsuspectingly upon the ice. This, usually, is not difficult to accomplish. At once the whole crew scrambles over the boat's sides, and with savage cries rushes forward to the massacre. Hundreds, thousands of the little baby seals, calling piteously for their mothers, are slaughtered by being struck upon the head with the short staves the sealers carry, and no sooner is the massacre complete than the bodies are swiftly skinned and then deserted, so that by the time the "hunters" again embark, the ice for miles around resembles a snowy battlefield strewn with crimson corpses.

There is at Newton Abbot, which lies six miles west of Shadcombe, an hostelry, which is the meeting place of Newfoundlanders, and of Newfoundland fishermen and sealers in particular, who may chance to come to Shadcombe, or to Torquay, or to Brixham, or to Dartmouth, or to Plymouth, or to any other port upon the South Coast within a short distance by rail. This inn has been in existence from a period, as the lawyers say, "so far back that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary." And it was from this inn that Wal Marner emerged one evening in late August.

He looked pleased with himself, and he had reason to be. His plans for the future were developing to his satisfaction: the one woman in the world he really cared for, loved him whole-heartedly in return; and a rather peculiar undertaking in Ireland in which he had become actively interested, seemed likely to develop in a manner even he, though an optimist, had never expected it could do.

His car awaited him close to the clock tower. He stepped into it, and told his driver to run him back to Shadcombe.

By the time the race-course and Kingsteignton had been left behind, his brain was working at high pressure.

He had just been talking to an old sealer whom he had last met on the beach of a picturesque inlet on the coast of Newfoundland, called Pinch Tiddle Cove. Many of the inlets there have such far-fetched names. There is one, for instance, called Sweetest-when-Sunny, another is known as the Hot Embrace. Such grotesque designations were given to these places probably in the very early days of Irish and West Country emigration, by people whose alleged humour was upon a par with their moral laxity. This old sealer had been

years before a seaman on a small tramp trading vessel. He had touched many ports in far distant lands and had quitted few without first benefiting pecuniarily by one method or another. For, in spite of his lack of education, he was a shrewd, far-seeing fellow, and wholly lacked integrity.

So George Ashcombe was dead. That information, imparted by the old sealer, was, at any rate, good hearing. Dead men tell no tales, and Ashcombe had been a man who might, at any time, had he happened upon Wal Marner, have blackmailed him to some purpose. There were one or two others, Marner reflected as he sped along, he wished were dead too. One of them was Milo.

His thoughts flashed from point to point. Presently, he wondered if the old sealer had not been mistaken when, some minutes before, he had declared to him that a certain ancient mariner, Joe Soper by name, was still alive and living in the neighbourhood. Soper, who at one time had been another of his tools, must be getting very old now, he reflected. It seemed remarkable his being still alive. He had always been a hard drinker, he would have supposed he must have died of drink long ago. It might be awkward if he met that man too, again.

The car shot past the turning up to Bishopsteignton. "There is no hurry," Marner called to his chauffeur. "Go quite slowly."

His thoughts interested him. He had no wish to cut them short.

The various people he had met since his return from America came one by one into his mind. As they did so, he summed up each quickly, and for the most part accurately. There were a few people he had become

acquainted with in Ireland, a few in London, and quite a lot here in Devonshire.

There were the Moncktons, and Mrs. Monckton's coterie, and some men at the Shadcombe Club, and some at the Newton Abbot Club, and Mrs. Ashcombe and Polly, and Milo and Tolhurst, whom he had met before in America, and that peculiar girl-detective, Irene Baxter—whom he knew all about—who for some weeks had successfully masqueraded in Shadcombe as a youth, and there was Gerald Grey

Yes, he liked Gerald Grey. He liked him exceedingly. Exactly why, he could not say. Possibly it was because his personality was so utterly different from the personality of the great majority of the men he had mixed with during his roving life. Was the little detective at all attracted by Grey . . . ?

The thought came to him unbidden. It had not occurred to him before, but now

He went on thinking about this. And the more he thought about it, the more various little incidents and happenings now came back to him which, when they had occurred, he had hardly noticed. Oh, yes, there could not be a doubt of it. There was an understanding of some kind between Grey and Irene Baxter. But they were keeping it very secret. Probably nobody but he had noticed anything up to the present.

And again his thoughts reverted to Yvonne.

He had made great plans regarding Yvonne. She had put her trust in him, had abandoned herself to him entirely. Well, he meant to prove to her very soon that in so doing she had not erred. What a woman among women she was in his eyes.

He thought of Mrs. Monckton. He had not met her often, but he liked her. She was so unlike most

of the women residents in the neighbourhood. How little she suspected he could read her like a book, grasp her innermost thoughts, tot up her true character, her qualities and her failings. Yes, Mrs. Willie Monckton was a woman to be trusted. She was not the sort of woman who stabs other women in the back. She had not a spiteful nature. Her outlook upon life was broad. Some day, he reflected, Yvonne might need a champion. If that day ever came, Mrs. Monckton would, he felt, be her champion.

And then, all at once, he thought of the singular murder six months before. Presently he chuckled.

"If only," he said mentally, "these people knew what I know. There would be little mystery then."

Then he thought of Milo, and frowned.

"What a scoundrel!" he said to himself.

Kingston and the tennis courts and Shadcombe's pretty harbour came into view upon his right. A tug steamer was piloting in a sailing ship across the bar. Over at Kingston roundabouts blared, and he saw that a regatta was in progress. The sound of a sharp report rang across the water, and the white sails of some fishing boats started off in line.

"Stop!" he called out. The car pulled up with a scraping sound.

He sat watching the race between the little boats. How pretty they looked overtaking each other. One, with a red sail, was fast forging ahead.

A man seated on a bench, and also watching the regatta, suddenly lowered his glass.

"Would you like to look?" he asked, holding out the binocular.

"I should, for a moment. Thank you very much," as he took the glass.

Marner watched the boats. Then he scanned the crowds upon the beach beside the river and swarming about the booths and tents, scrambling on to the roundabouts. He looked at Ness House, then swept the rocks below the Ness. The lenses were very powerful. He could distinguish people's features. All at once he stopped. The glass was focused upon some fishermen hauling in their net. A little way apart from them stood a weather-beaten tar. He smoked a short pipe. His hands were in his pockets. He was doing nothing, merely looking on. He wore a seaman's jersey and corduroys and sea boots.

As he watched this man, Marner's lips became compressed. Yes, he was not mistaken. That old tar could be none other, was none other than

"Red sail wins—wins easily!"

The speaker was the owner of the field-glass. All the time Marner had been using it, he had been, unknown to Marner, standing up in the car scrutinising his features.

"No doubt of that," Marner answered. "Here, take your glass back to watch the finish."

So Joe Soper he had so fervently hoped, not half an hour ago, he would never see again, whom he had even hoped might have drunk himself to death, was not dead. Well, he was glad he had just made a certain suggestion to the old sealer, or rather, hinted it very broadly. The sealer he knew to be an unscrupulous scoundrel; he might actually do what he, Marner, had proposed!

But anyhow, he must set to work and find out where Soper lived, then formulate some plan to keep the man's mouth shut. It would never do to have him living there close by, with the knowledge he possessed.

He would soon hear that a rich visitor named Marner was stopping in the town, he would make inquiries and then

But why not leave the town? No, he liked the place, and he liked the residents he had met there. He had almost decided to buy a house nearby, possibly at Ringmore, on the Kingston side of the river. It would be pleasant to stay there sometimes with Yvonne; but he could not do that if this man were hanging about.

Another pistol shot echoed across the water. Red sail had won the race. The sound of frantic cheering came faintly across the water.

There was yet another shot, the sharp crack of a small pistol.

The man with the glass had fired it and Marner collapsed on to the floor of the car in a heap. Instantly the driver turned, sprang from his seat and rushed at the assailant. But before he could reach him, two more shots had been discharged. The driver stumbled forward and lay flat upon his face on the dusty road.

The toll-keeper, totting up his accounts in the lodge at the bridge-head, heard the shots. So did several people walking along the bridge. But they paid no attention. They supposed the reports had to do with the regatta.

The man with the glass slipped his pistol back into his pocket, then looked up and down the road.

Nobody was in sight. He walked a little way in the direction of Shadcombe, then turned to the left up a steep, narrow, high-shouldered lane which would eventually lead him, as he knew, out on to the Haldon Moor.

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNSOLVED PROBLEM

AUTUMN had come again. The whole of the West Country from Exeter to Plymouth and beyond it, was a red and green expanse, patched with woodlands of copper and russet, and browns of various shades, and amber and gold and fawn, with here and there thatched hamlets and solitary whitewashed cottages with tiled or slated roofs. From deep valleys and cramped meadows came the clatter of reaping machines and the hoarse cries of farm drivers urging their teams along, the cracking of whips and occasionally a volley of reports, as some party of partridge shooters fired a salvo into a fleeing covey. The whole country was beautiful and peaceful; the landscapes upon all sides picturesque in the extreme.

In the grassgrown lanes with their high banks on either side, which extend in a sort of network from Haldon past Luton Bottom, down to Chudleigh and Bovey Tracey, embracing on their way Ideford and other villages, a young man and a young woman, who looked little more than a girl, roamed aimlessly. For a mile or more they had strolled along without speaking. The afternoon was well advanced, and away over Dartmoor where the great black tors stood outlined against the sky, the sun was slowly sinking.

Suddenly the girl spoke.

"You know, Gerald," she said, "I am most bitterly disappointed. I had so hoped, and I fully expected, that long before now I should have solved the Holcombe problem and so set your mind at rest. But I am obliged to admit to-day that the mystery has baffled me, defeated me utterly and completely, at least I fear so. I have discovered a good deal, I know, and some parts of the puzzle fit, but some do not fit, and several are still missing. And the missing parts are just those with the most important links."

Her companion remained silent. He did not even look at her.

"Are you annoyed with me, disappointed in me, Gerald?" she went on anxiously. "I have tried very hard, I have done my best, I have indeed. Since I came into this profession, which you say you dislike so, I have never worked so hard at any case that has been brought to me to deal with. This failure is a blow to my pride too, I can assure you. You know how I have always boasted to you that no problem of this sort could be too intricate for me to disentangle. Well, I admit now that the Holcombe mystery has beaten me."

As she stopped, he turned and stood looking down into her face.

"Poor little girl," he said in a tone of sympathy, and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Was he growing fond of her, even coming to love her? He wondered this as they sat together a little later, watching the sun disappearing below Hay Tor. Hitherto he had looked upon her only as a friend, perhaps as his best friend. That night, near Holcombe, when he had kissed her hair and fondled her as she stood with him in her male attire, he had been

carried away by a passing impulse. It was the sight of her glorious hair with the moonbeams shining down upon it that had stirred him that night. But now the feeling he experienced was different. Also it was not transitory. Though his moment of deep emotion was over, the powerful affection he had then begun to feel for her remained. And as it remained, so did the memory of Ella Ashcombe begin to fade.

In silence they watched the fiery autumn sun vanish completely, leaving a fierce, ruddy glow across a wide expanse of moor. Gradually the red glow again grew pink, then a deeper pink, which in turn blended into purple and finally darkened to a deep leaden hue.

In the darkness their tongues once more became loosened, but now they spoke only of things of common interest. There was no reference to the passionate incident of a little while before. Subconsciously, each felt rather ashamed of what had happened. The girl fancied, wrongly, that Grey might think less of her because of her weakness towards him. Grey, on the other hand, felt he had deceived her by surrendering to an emotion when he did not as yet love her.

"It is natural, I suppose," she said presently in a low voice, "that my services have not been sought in connection with Mr. Marner."

"There was talk of employing Baxter's Agency," he answered; "but the proposal was rejected."

"Why was that?"

"There were some who disapproved. It was urged at a meeting of the District Council, the day after the crime, that the police should handle the affair. When Baxter's was mentioned—you don't mind my telling you?—it was pointed out that this agency had

failed to unravel the Holcombe mystery. You see, every one knows that I employed Baxter's Agency."

"Who in particular turned down the proposal?" Irene asked in a hard voice.

"Well, as you ask, I may as well tell you. Octavius Milo, though resident in Exeter, has interests in Shadcombe, and is on the District Council. When Baxter's was mooted, he voted dead against it."

"Oh!"

After a short pause she asked:

"Is Mr. Marner getting better?"

"Yes. I heard only to-day that he is recovering rapidly. The bullet grazed his temple, as I think I told you in my letter, and he was unconscious for some hours. After that he was delirious; they feared that brain fever would set in. During his delirium he talked very strangely; I mean he spoke very freely. The doctor told me that he kept calling out 'Yvonne.'

"She has been with him a lot, and has nursed him day and night. She refused to let any nurse come near him. His thoughts seemed to wander all over the world, the doctor also told me. He spoke of strange happenings, and people we both know—the Ashcombes, and Bobbie Tolhurst, and Milo; also of you and me, and of Mrs. Monckton and her friends. The doctor said that some things he spoke about in his delirium he felt he ought not to repeat. Marner talked a lot about the sea, too, and of happenings in Newfoundland. Oh, and he alluded more than once to poor Ella's death."

"The doctor told you that?"

"Yes. However, he is sane enough now, and should be out and about soon. There was an inquest on the chauffeur. Poor fellow, both bullets went straight into

his brain. He was killed instantaneously and leaves a wife and children."

"How dreadful! You told me the pistol used was apparently a small one."

"A pocket automatic, the police think. The bullets were nickel-plated, twenty-five calibre. They think the pistol used must have been a Webley-Scott automatic. No one has the least idea who committed the crime, or why it was committed. The police are inclined to think a woman may have done it."

"Oh, no, not a woman. If a woman had done it, it would have been from some motive of revenge. Therefore, she would not have shot the chauffeur. Her act of revenge accomplished, she would not have cared what afterwards happened to her. No, the man who fired those shots was some cool, habitual criminal. He would not have attempted the crime had any one been in sight. The crime was premeditated, that is to say he meant to do it; but he may not have meant to do it then. The opportunity occurred unexpectedly and he seized it. I am sure I am right about that."

Again she was silent a minute.

"Have you never wondered, Gerald," she asked suddenly, "what became of that bundle tied up with string that was found at Hole Head, and given to the police?"

"I have wondered often and often."

"Do you remember the Chief Constable, who gave evidence at Miss Ashcombe's inquest, and was a witness also at your trial?"

"Quite well."

"His manner, if you remember, both at the inquest and at the trial was said to be very strange."

"It was very strange. Not a bit like his ordinary manner. I know the man well."

"Nobody has ever suspected him of knowing anything about the Holcombe crime, I suppose because he is the Constable. I have suspected him all along. And I believe it is due to him that we heard no more about that bundle. Gerald, I believe the Constable is the man who shot Mr. Marner."

"Oh, but why? It seems to me most unlikely. He is a steady, respectable man. I have known him for some years."

"And I have known 'steady, respectable men' who in reality were criminals. Listen. That Constable was born and brought up in California. Then he became a sailor on a tramp trading ship. He was a great deal in Iceland. You have a man living in Shadcombe who often goes to Iceland. That man met Jeffries in Reykiavik. They became friendly. Later, the Shadcombe man brought Jeffries to England and to Shadcombe. Some time afterwards Jeffries decided that he would like to join the police. The Shadcombe man put him in the way of doing so, said he had known him a long time and went out of his way to recommend him very strongly to the authorities. Jeffries was accepted, and by his ability, intelligence and devotion to duty was quickly promoted, and eventually was appointed Chief Constable. All this I have found out recently, or, rather, my agency has found it out."

"Still, I don't see how that makes him guilty of shooting Marner, or even casts any suspicion."

"There is much more that I could tell you, but I had better not tell it to you yet. But this I will say. I believe that Miss Ashcombe and Mr. Marner's chauffeur were both murdered by sailors, or by men who had been sailors. Whether or not both crimes were committed by the same man I cannot yet say.

I consider that there is more than a possibility that this may have been so. Do you remember the cave on Haldon, that we discovered at the picnic?"

"Of course."

"And the letter received by Madame Yvonne which explained how to locate it?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the hank of twine, tarred twine, that was found there, and the tallow candles?"

"I remember everything. You recollect I said in court that I had an excellent memory."

"You hardly need an excellent memory to remember that."

Her tone told him that she was smiling.

"Now, just where the car stood in which Mr. Marner was found unconscious, a bit of tarred twine was picked up. There was a knot in the end of it, a rather peculiar knot. So far as I have been able to ascertain up to the present, that knot was very like the knots in the bit of tarred twine with which poor Miss Ashcombe was strangled."

"How on earth have you found all this out, Irene?"

"One of my people has been down here since I left. He is staying in a farmhouse near Bishopsteignton, and I am sleeping there to-night. That is why I suggested our meeting in these lanes ; this lane leads down to the farm, which isn't far from here."

She looked at her illuminated wrist-watch.

"Which reminds me," she said in a softer tone, "that we ought to be parting."

He took her hand in his, and squeezed it.

When he strolled into the Club, after dining alone at home, Grey found Milo and Bobbie Tolhurst upstairs playing billiards. On the raised seats around

the table several members lounged, watching the game. The retired Colonel was among them.

Milo, after making his stroke, looked across at Grey queerly. Some minutes later he observed carelessly:

"Your man gave me a lift this afternoon, Grey. Your car overtook me on the Exeter Road, just above the cemetery."

"He will always do that, if you ask him," Grey answered. "Not like some people's drivers."

"Said he had dropped you at Haldon," Milo went on, potting the red. "On your way to see a rural client, I presume?"

Some of the onlookers laughed.

"Where are you going to, my pretty client?" the Colonel observed, dryly.

There was more laughter at this. The Colonel's sly sallies usually evoked laughter, whether witty or not.

"There's a French saying," Grey said quietly, as Milo finished his break, "I think it is attributed to La Bruyère: *C'est une grande misère que de n'avoir pas assez d'esprit pour bien parler, ni assez de jugement pour se taire.*"

"Which means, oh, my French scholar—what?" Bobbie Tolhurst asked.

"That it is a misfortune not to have enough sense to talk intelligently, nor tact enough to remain silent, that is a free translation."

Milo coloured to the roots of his black hair.

"As free as some people's tongues," he rapped out. "I wonder what a pretty girl would look like in the moonlight, Grey, with her beautiful hair hanging down her back—provided, of course, she wore no wig?"

There was a moment's silence. The watching members peered furtively at Grey. There appeared to be

some hidden allusion in Milo's words. Grey broke the tension.

"You remind me of some women, Octavius Milo," he said, lighting a cigar.

"Indeed? In what way?"

"You speak without reflecting. You should do what a looking-glass does."

"I don't follow you."

"Reflect without speaking."

"Really your mental gymnastics and happy—or are they unhappy?—epigrams are altogether above my low plane of intelligence," Milo answered, making a miss-cue. "They are better adapted to the other sex and their quick perception of the trivial. But no doubt you have found that out. You must have many opportunities, these fine nights."

"Curse you two!" Tolhurst exclaimed. "You put me off my game with your interchange of veiled affronts. Have a drink both of you, and stop it. Milo, you are playing with the wrong ball."

The interruption served its purpose. But that night Grey and Milo did not speak to each other again.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WOMAN'S DEDUCTIONS

IN some respects Irene Baxter and Yvonne resembled each other. Both were women of strong character; both women of temperament; both had passionate natures, which they kept usually under restraint; both had begun life in humble circumstances and worked their way up by determination, industry and hard work; and both being unconventional and having seen many sides of life, were tolerant and broad-minded.

Thus it was not surprising that at their first meeting they should have been attracted to each other, and that a warm friendship should quickly have grown up between them. A few days after the incidents recorded in the last chapter, they were together in Exeter, when Yvonne suddenly said:

"Your work must be extraordinarily interesting, Irene. I should love to try my hand at it, if I had the intelligence."

Irene Baxter smiled.

"You don't need intelligence, dear," she answered, "so much as quick perception and what I can describe only as 'low cunning.' Yes, the work is interesting, but you make no friends, or at least very few. One's acquaintances are for the most part suspicious and mistrustful."

"I should not mind that a bit; I should have no

use for such friends. You have one true friend, at any rate—Gerald Grey.”

Irene turned quickly. Her eyes shone.

“What makes you say that? Who has told you so? Has he spoken to you about me?”

“Of course not. Nobody has. But I have eyes, and possibly some measure of what you have just called ‘quick perception.’ Does he want to marry you?”

“No.”

“You mean he has not asked you. But he will. My dear, Gerald is falling in love with you as fast as ever he can. Naturally he has not completely recovered yet from the shock he received last February.”

“If I could believe that”

“Why not believe it? I speak the truth. I am older than you, and my knowledge of men is more extensive than yours, much more. Perhaps you should feel grateful for that. You don’t know what my life has been, and I hope you never will. Indeed, in that respect we are opposites. I have lived for men all my life, or as long as I can remember. You, on the contrary, have professed to despise men. They have bored you—for that matter they have often bored me. Now my whole soul is wrapped up in a man—in one man now. After the stormy life I have led, I have at last fallen in love, hopelessly, irrevocably. If Wal Marner should play me false—oh! but he never will. It is curious that you and I should both suddenly have had our hearts swept out of us like this, isn’t it? And just at the same time. Look, there is Octavius Milo. How I abhor that man!”

Milo was coming towards them, along Queen Street. As he caught sight of them he looked the other way, and crossed the street diagonally.

"That was only to be expected," Yvonne went on lightly. "I wonder, Irene, what he knows about that cave on Haldon?"

"Do you think he knows much?"

"I do. Have you discovered anything fresh lately?"

"Nothing. Oh, Yvonne, I am so depressed at my failure to solve the Holcombe mystery. You can have no idea how disappointed I am."

"You may solve that mystery yet, and perhaps I can help you."

"Do you really think you can?" her companion exclaimed quickly.

"Yes. But now, first, with regard to that cave. There are one or two people you tell me you suspect of knowing something about the murder of Ella Ashcombe. One of them is the old man who lives mostly in Holcombe, and frequents the coast generally, the old man you told me about who was in the Holcombe inn both nights you were there, and was evidently disconcerted when the murder and the cave were mentioned. You told me the other men there that night implied that the old man in corduroys knew something of the murder.

"That old man, you said, seemed to have been a sailor during some period of his life, and to have been in many lands. You yourself heard him talking about Newfoundland twice; incidentally I danced once in St. John's, and was hissed off the stage," she gave a little laugh. "I was shown many things of interest there, among others the curious little natural caves that some of the natives 'take over' and dwell in. In every one of those caves I visited there were peculiar shelves hewn in the sides, just like those in the Haldon cave. Also each had a hole bored in the roof, to act as

a chimney when they lit a fire inside. There was the same sort of hole in the roof of the Haldon cave, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember it."

"Then, the only candles used in Newfoundland were common tallow candles, dips; at least that was so each time I was there. Do you remember the tallow candles Gerald Grey picked up in the cave? And didn't you find a bit of tallow candle among the rubbish in Mrs. Ashcombe's garden just after the murder, though the maid, Charlotte, declared to you that no dips had ever come into Gareth Cottage? And was not a bit of tallow candle found in the bundle discovered in a field near Gareth Cottage?"

"Yes, yes, go on."

"So much for that. It may all be coincidence, but on the other hand

"Next we come to the fire. You were 'Frank Rawlins' then," she smiled, "and a very charming boy you made, dear. I almost fell in love with you myself, and——"

"Oh, keep to the point, Yvonne. As Mr. Marner says, 'Cut the rough stuff.' What about the fire?"

"You remember raking about the débris, and finding a brass crucifix. Polly took it from you and showed it to her mother. It was obvious to you, as it was to me, that neither Mrs. Ashcombe nor Polly had ever seen that crucifix before. Then to whom had it belonged?

"Mrs. Ashcombe is not a religious woman. I should say she is the opposite. So she would not have been likely to possess a crucifix. On our way home that day I asked Wal Marner—I still call him Wal Marner—to get it from Mrs. Ashcombe, which he did. She made

him a present of it. When I came to examine it, I found that, as I had half-expected, it was a replica of the brass crucifixes sold in St. John's, Newfoundland, where everybody is religious—that is why they hissed my dance. I believe that crucifix had been in the ‘mysterious’ room which the fire revealed, and I believe the owner of it was either a native of Newfoundland or had been in Newfoundland. Did you ever notice that baby seal, a white furry stuffed thing, in Mrs. Ashcombe’s sitting-room?”

“I often noticed it. Mrs. Ashcombe told me it had been given to her; but she didn’t say by whom.”

“That seal, I am positive, came from Newfoundland. I have one just like it, which was given to me in St. John’s. Everybody who goes to Newfoundland brings home a stuffed baby seal, just as people who go to Heidelberg, or to Düsseldorf, bring back German pipes, and painted beer-mugs with inscriptions on them, in the same way that people who go to Interlaken bring home cuckoo-clocks. My dear Irene,” she ended, laughing, “don’t you think my ‘quick perception’ is wonderful, and that I have ‘low cunning’ enough to go into partnership with you?”

Irene Baxter did not answer. In point of fact she had not heard her friend’s closing words. She was thinking of what Yvonne had just been saying. Yes, why, yes, all these points, happenings, coincidences, or whatever they might be, fitted in with some of her own discoveries and inferences. The missing links were after all being recovered one by one.

It was as well, perhaps, for his own peace of mind, that Octavius Milo remained in ignorance of this conversation. After deliberately avoiding Yvonne and

her companion, by crossing the street, he had gone back to his office, where a client was to meet him by appointment at three o'clock.

The young lawyer seemed in an irritable mood. Apparently he had something on his mind. Indeed, for some time past his clerks had noticed the change that had come over him, and had secretly commented upon it. He had always kept them well up to their work, but until recently they had never had occasion to complain of his being either unjust or irrational. Now, all at once, he seemed to have become both. The change, had they known it, dated from that night when in the lanes between Holcombe and Shadcombe he had come upon Grey and Irene Baxter.

Almost daily his irritability increased. His confidential clerk, a most deserving fellow in the sense of being a devoted and faithful tool, admitted, when he went home in the evening to his wife and family, that "the chief" seemed very odd of late, and that whereas formerly the work in the office had run on ball-bearings, it now took him all his time to please his employer at all. Try as he would, the clerk said, he could not account for the change, or assign any possible cause for it.

Alone in his office at the big writing-table on which, neatly arranged, were rows of folded documents, bound round with pink tape, Milo sat mechanically toying with a pen. His thoughts were not of his work: nor had his heart been in it for several weeks past. The sight of Yvonne and Irene Baxter walking together along Queen Street that afternoon had set him thinking again of these two women. He knew now that "Frank Rawlins" was in reality Irene Baxter, of Baxter's Agency, and he had concluded that her reason for

masquerading as a man had been with a view to making discoveries in connection with the Holcombe Mystery. But even if she were a detective, why had she scraped acquaintance with him that time at an hotel in Shrewsbury, and wormed herself into his confidence, indeed temporarily into his affection? That was one of several questions that puzzled as well as disconcerted him. Did she entertain a suspicion that he knew anything about Ella Ashcombe's murder? It seemed hardly likely, and yet

She knew a great deal about him and about some of his "operations," far too much for his peace of mind, he reflected. And then, how did she stand in relation to Grey? He knew that Grey had retained her services in regard to the Holcombe Mystery, but apparently he had now other intentions concerning her. And Grey disliked him. He knew that. He believed that he disliked him intensely. Well, if that were so, was it not more than likely that Grey was employing Irene to make certain discoveries in relation to himself, and to his own past life?

Then he thought of his visit to Baxter's Agency, in Oxford Street, and of the courteous, elderly gentleman who had received him there. Who could that old man be? Was he Irene's father? Now he came to think of it, he had borne a sort of slight resemblance to Irene, very faint, but still

He looked up at the clock. It was nearly half-past three, and his client had not arrived. He went on thinking of the women, now more especially of Yvonne. He disliked the intimacy which had sprung up between the two. He mistrusted it. Yvonne, too, knew so much about him. And then he had wronged her, wronged her most abominably.

He blotted out these reflections. They were not pleasant, and they stirred the last remnants of conscience he possessed. Supposing that Yvonne had told Irene of what had happened—of the way he had twice jockeyed her out of large sums of money

No, he doubted her having told that to Irene. She would, by doing so, have compromised herself, and then

The clerk entered with some letters. As he laid them on the table, he drew Milo's attention to one, which was registered. Then he left the room.

Milo took up the registered letter and glanced at it thoughtfully. The handwriting on the envelope was unknown to him. Then he tore it open.

As he read its contents, an expression of amazement crept into his face. Presently he grew rather pale. Then, pulling himself suddenly together, he sprang up with an oath.

He read the letter carefully through again. A few moments later he snatched up the telephone transmitter

CHAPTER XIX

CONCERNS CERTAIN USURERS

MESSRS. MOSSE & EVELBURG were an eminently respectable firm of bill discounters, whose offices nestled in a court under the shadow of St. Paul's. There was nothing pretentious about their establishment. Nor was there about their advertisements. They posed as "Two gentlemen with considerable private means" whose philanthropic hearts prompted them to "advance sums of £100, and upward, to persons of social standing" who might find themselves "temporarily embarrassed." They had no desire to reap a rich harvest, or any harvest to speak of, through making these advances. They knew themselves what it was to be hard-up. They had suffered, and they wished to prevent others from suffering in the same way. Such philanthropy might be unusual. Undoubtedly it was. But as every rule has its exception, so were they the exception to the generality of mankind.

At least so their advertisement implied.

When, however, those "persons of social standing," for whom they professed to cater, applied to them for relief from their "temporary embarrassment," they found that, before relief could be obtained, certain little formalities had to be completed which put a rather different complexion upon the purported liberality of their would-be benefactors.

And so it happened that when Octavius Milo read

the contents of his registered letter on that beautiful autumn afternoon, he experienced a feeling of both surprise and annoyance. For the letter ran as follows:

“SIR,—We hold three bills, endorsed by you, for sums of £3,000, £7,000, and £2,000 respectively, which upon presentation have not been met. We would, therefore, ask you to please remit to us at once the sum of £15,500 to cover principal and interest. Should you be desirous of renewing, we shall of course be pleased to meet you on mutually satisfactory terms. There is no need for us to mention in a letter the name of the individual to whom these advances were made.

“Your obedient servants,
“MOSSE & EVELBURG.”

The hour that elapsed before the call could be got through to London, Milo spent in furious speculation as to who could have played this trick upon him, if it were a trick ; if it were not, then how could Mosse and Evelburg have come to make such a gross mistake. He knew the firm by name, through seeing their advertisements in the newspapers ; but to suppose he would be so asinine as to back a bill, let alone three bills, even for his best friend

But whose bills could they be? That point also puzzled him. And were they drawn in favour of a man, or of a woman? So far as he could recollect he had never in his life backed a bill for anybody.

He was endeavouring to solve several such problems simultaneously, when his telephone bell rang :

“Your London trunk call is through,” a toneless voice said.

He picked up the receiver.

"Mosse & Evelburg speaking. Who are you?"

"Octavius Milo. I am speaking from Exeter. I have just received a letter from you, dated yesterday."

"Oh, ah! yes. Vell, do you vish to renew, Mr. Milo? Ve shall be quite prepared to meet your convenience in every vay ve can. Perhaps you could give us a call—eh?"

Milo was boiling, but he kept himself in check.

"I have no wish to do anything of the sort," he answered. "In fact, I repudiate your bills entirely. I have never in my life backed a bill; if I did so I certainly should not be fool enough to back one for anybody applying to a money-lender. You have made some big mistake. You have mixed me up with someone else."

He caught the sound of a fat chuckle at the other end of the line.

"No mistake—no mistake, I assure you, Mr. Milo. Ve have letters from you in your own handwriting, and signed by you yourself. Oh, no, there is no mistake, Mr. Milo. You had better come and see us, and ve vill see vot ve can do for you. I am sure ve can propose terms vich vill command your satisfaction? Ven can you gif us a call?"

Indignant and exasperated though he felt, Milo deemed it advisable to humour them. Also he was curious to see the bills. He had not endorsed them, of course, but he wondered whose they were, also who his namesake might be.

"I will run up to-morrow morning," he said, "and be with you at three o'clock."

Punctually at three he entered the loan office, and some minutes later was shown into Mr. Evelburg's room.

The Jew, a sleek creature with an unusually oily manner, rose as he entered.

"Very pleased to see you, Mr. Milo, I am sure," he said, and rolled forward a heavily upholstered chair. "Won't you sit down? Here, let me offer you a cigar," and he produced a box.

But Milo would neither sit down nor accept the cigar.

"I want to see those bills," he said curtly.

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Milo."

Mr. Evelburg went over to his safe, which he unlocked. He was a short, round-legged, pot-bellied little man, with Semitic features and a shiny bald head. He walked with a waddle rather like a duck's. Watching him, Milo was struck by his unprepossessing personality. He found himself wondering if Mosse was at all like Evelburg.

"Here they are, Mr. Milo," and returning with them, he held them flattened out upon the table.

Milo bent over and examined the bills. Mr. Evelburg would not let him touch them; they were too precious. Each was in order, and each bore the signature of Wal Marner, backed by Octavius Milo in his own handwriting.

This was certainly a surprise.

Milo bent lower still. Yes, the signature exactly resembled his. And yet he had never signed the bills.

"Those signatures are forgeries," he said calmly, after a short pause. "I have never seen those bills before. I had never heard of them until yesterday, when I got your letter."

"Oh, come, come, Mr. Milo," the fat little Jew exclaimed, with a low chuckle. "Don't say that, don't. Look, there were two witnesses to your signature," and he pointed to two other names upon the bills. "Come,

Let us talk it over quietly. Do haf a cigar? No? Well, now, listen to the suggestion I haf to make."

"I don't want your suggestion or anybody else's," Milo answered irritably. "I say the signatures are forgeries, and they are. The signature resembles mine, but it is not mine. That I shall presently prove."

"Oh? And how?"

Mr. Evelburg's tone and expression had changed suddenly. He had discarded the velvet glove in favour of the bullying attitude.

"That you will see, later. Meanwhile I repudiate those bills and refuse to meet them."

Mr. Evelburg shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will, Mr. Milo," he said with an open sneer. "You know the procedure that will follow. You are a lawyer."

"You said you had letters in my handwriting," Milo exclaimed suddenly. "May I see them?"

"Vy yes, surely."

He produced from a drawer some letters tied up in a packet. After untying the packet he handed it to Milo.

There were nine letters, all in his own handwriting and bearing his own signature. All were short letters. Some were replies to letters that had apparently been written to him by Mosse and Evelburg and addressed "Care of Wal Marner, Esq.," at hotels in various towns in California—Los Angeles, Colorado, Sacramento, and San Francisco. The letters alleged to have been written by him were written on the headed note-paper of hotels in those towns. He looked at the dates. The letters had all been written during the time he had been with Marner in those cities, and all referred to the bills which, according to the letters apparently in his handwriting, he had expressed willingness to back.

A cold sweat broke out upon him. He saw now the trick the scoundrel, Marner, had played upon him. It would be impossible for him to prove an alibi, seeing that all the time he had actually been with Marner. Nor would it be advisable for him to try to show up Marner and prove him a forger, because Marner had enough evidence metaphorically to hang him; enough, at any rate, to reveal him as a swindler. In a flash he saw that each check-mated the other, just as he and Irene Baxter had check-mated each other that night in the lanes between Holcombe and Shadcombe. Oh, what a fool he had been to associate himself with a man of Marner's principles and evil repute! The two had together engineered some clever and profitable financial "ramps," and in doing so each had shown himself to the other in his true light and had, at the same time, wittingly placed himself in the other's power.

"Vell, Mr. Milo, vot haf you to say now? You don't any more pretend the signatures on the bills are not yours, eh?"

The Jew's voice jarred upon the young man.

"You must give me time to think the matter over," he answered in a less arrogant tone.

"I gif you von day more."

"Ridiculous! I must have a fortnight, or at least a week."

Again the money-lender shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible. The bills vill be overdue. Vy not renew them? Come, let us do it now."

For an instant Milo entertained the idea. The next moment he answered:

"Whatever may happen, I shall never do that."

"Very goot. By twelve noon next Friday they must be met, all of them, you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

Blindly he picked up his hat and went out into the street. As he looked up at St. Paul's the thought came to him: Why not clamber up to the top—he had been up St. Paul's once—and throw himself off, and so finish it all?

But whatever else he might be, Milo was no coward. No, he would face it all, he must face it all. He felt glad just then that he had never married, that if eventually disgrace and public odium should be his lot, none but he would suffer. But fifteen thousand pounds! He could get it, of course, but at what a sacrifice. True, there was his clients' money—some of his clients were very rich—and there were such things as rash investments.

Investments, however, other than betting transactions, do not yield a big profit in a few hours as a rule, and he needed the money at once. Then the thought came to him—why not risk his luck upon the Turf? Upon the few occasions when he had done so, merely for amusement, he had been fortunate. And, why, yes, there was a big meeting on to-morrow. . . . He knew plenty of commission agents he could get the money on easily and if luck should favour him, he would be able on the Monday to pay the blood-suckers their principal and interest.

He thought of Marner, and his blood boiled. He thought of Irene Baxter, of Yvonne, of Gerald Grey—oh, how he hated the lot! So deep was his detestation of them at that moment that he conceived them all to be in league against him. Marner had swindled him in the most cold and calculating way conceivable, professing all the while to be his partner in financial ventures, and his friend, Irene Baxter, had deceived him and gone

over to Grey, the worst rival he had in his profession. And Yvonne

He began to think about Yvonne. She and Marner were as thick as thieves, had been for a long time. Could she . . . ? was she . . . ?

His thoughts sped along as he walked quickly down Ludgate Hill. Yvonne was a woman without a reputation. Could she, did she, know anything about this transaction of Marner's, and how he had set about it? Could she have helped him in any way? He had himself robbed Yvonne on three separate occasions; had she taken no steps to bring him to book merely because . . . ?

The one thought which might have helped him, never once occurred to him, that the letters and his signature had been forged, not by Wal Marner, but by Yvonne following Marner's directions.

* * * * *

“Octavius Milo has by now got his bombshell, I guess.”

Marner, lying back in the long arm-chair in his hotel sitting-room, blew a cloud of smoke into the air, and shifted his big cigar to the other side of his mouth.

“What do you mean by ‘bombshell’?” Yvonne asked, turning quickly. She was standing at the bay window, and had been gazing out at the blue sea, across the oval stretch of grass known as The Den.

“Those bills he backed fell due yesterday.”

“You mean those I”

“Precisely, those you”

Presently his companion began to walk restlessly about the room.

"I hated doing that," she exclaimed suddenly. "You can't think how I hated it."

"Did you? I didn't. You are even with him now, my girl. You ought to be glad."

"I am glad, and I am not. It seemed such a horrid thing to do. Besides, are you sure, are you quite positive discovery is impossible?"

"Quite. By now he probably knows who has done him down. He must be furious, savage. I expect he is thinking of some means of getting back on me. But he can't open his lips, or move a hand. He daren't. I have him by the windpipe."

"Still I feel frightened, somehow. The sentence for forgery is a long term of imprisonment."

"If the forger is discovered—yes—Come over here, Yvonne."

She came beside the chair. He drew her to him, and as she bent over him, he began to smooth her hair. Presently he drew her down until her lips were pressed on his.

"What a woman you are, Yvonne!" he exclaimed in an undertone. "I have never met a woman like you, never."

"That may perhaps be fortunate," she answered, smiling.

"You have all the attributes that appeal to me. You are fascinating and faithful. What more could a man want?"

"You won't ever ask me to do that sort of thing again? Promise me you won't."

"I promise. The past is gone and done with. It was chiefly because you told me how the young blackguard had swindled you that I decided I would pay him back, and in his own coin."

They remained in silence for a little while. They were terribly in love. It was the wild love of two strong natures meeting for the first time upon the same plane.

They were all to each other, and always would be, and they knew it. Yet, curiously enough from the standpoint of the world, which makes a fetish of conventions, marriage had not as yet been spoken of by either. They were going to be married, of course. Each had thought about it, but for the time marriage, in its common acceptance, seemed too prosaic a thing to dwell upon.

Yvonne disengaged herself from her lover's arms.

"Have you forgotten," she said suddenly, "that we are lunching with Mrs. Monckton, and going afterwards to Teignbridge?"

"I have not forgotten. I wish I had. I would sooner stay alone here with you, Yvonne, much sooner."

"And I, too," she answered. "But I think we ought to go. I have a reason, too, for wanting to meet to-day the people who will be there. Come."

Laughing, she tried to pull him up. He sprang up of his own accord, and again folded her in his arms.

"My darling, my own darling," he exclaimed.

Had he known what he was to witness that night at Teignbridge, he might even then have hesitated before going.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE FOOTBRIDGE

MRS. WILLIE MONCKTON was in great form at her luncheon-party that day. As usual, she had gathered together from among her large circle of acquaintances people who would, as she put it, "hit it off" together. In our expressive latter-day slang, there were no "duds" among her guests. All seemed to belong, if one may so express it, to the same atmosphere. They were a cheery, happy, intelligent lot of people, with possibly one exception.

The exception was Mrs. Jacob Mulhall, who in Shadcombe was generally regarded as a kind of news agency, her "news" being mostly rumours, or information based on rumours, for the most part tittle-tattle, mainly local and with some sort of sting in it. Why she had invited her to this luncheon-party, Mrs. Willie herself could not have said. She did not like Mrs. Mulhall, and she hated the semi-spiteful aspersions she was so fond of casting upon people. Perhaps the real reason she had included her was that she wanted to amuse her other guests. For Mrs. Mulhall was a source of amusement—of sorts. The very acrimony of her comments sufficed to ensure that.

"I invited Mr. Milo, but he was not able to come," the hostess remarked during lunch. "He gave no reason. At least he said he had a prior engagement,

which I don't believe. Hasn't it struck any of you," she went on, "that he has rather changed of late? He has become so silent, so subdued; he is almost morose sometimes. I believe he has something on his mind."

Several of her guests murmured assent, more or less out of politeness. Nobody ventured any definite assertion, until Mrs. Jacob Mulhall suddenly cut in in her rather rasping voice:

"Yes, he has something on his mind. And I know what it is."

At once attention became focussed upon her.

"And what is it?" Mrs. Willie asked, opening her large blue-grey eyes rather wide. "Do tell us." But Mrs. Mulhall tightened her lips, so that they seemed to make a straight line across the base of her face. It was a trick she had when she wanted to imply that she knew more than she meant to say. It did not improve her appearance, Mrs. Willie used to say that it "made her look like a governess."

"I don't think you ought to say thinks like that if you are not prepared to substantiate them," she remarked. She had such a pleasant way of saying things which might otherwise have sounded unpleasant, that nobody could ever feel annoyed, even those to whom such remarks were addressed.

Mrs. Mulhall smiled coldly.

"I am always tactful and always discreet," she observed sententiously; whereat several of the guests glanced meaningly at each other. Mrs. Willie laughed outright. The unconscious humour of the claim appealed to her.

"Oh, we know that," she exclaimed. "Any way Mr. Milo seems to me somehow different in his manner recently; others, too, have noticed it. You are fortu-

nate," she turned to Mrs. Mulhall, "to be in his confidence. I wish some lawyer would make me his confidant. Won't you, Mr. Grey?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," Grey answered, smiling. "Only . . . ?"

"Yes? Only what?"

"It would be unprofessional. Ask Vera."

Vera Trevor, who was conversing in an undertone with Yvonne, caught her name.

"What is that about me?" she asked quickly, looking up.

"I was telling Mrs. Monckton you might think it unprofessional of me if I——"

"Mr. Grey, do let bygones be bygones," Vera Trevor interrupted sharply, though she was smiling. She had flushed slightly, and the heightened colour became her.

Their hostess deftly turned the conversation, and for some time local topics of small interest were talked about. Mrs. Ashcombe, now in half-mourning only, was in quite good spirits. Polly seemed prettier than ever. At intervals Marner set the whole table in a roar by relating some piquant anecdote, some past experience of his own. Yvonne, too, was in a gay mood, and looked supremely happy. Irene Baxter said little. She kept watching each speaker in turn, as though trying to fathom his, or her innermost thoughts. But mostly she looked at Grey.

For by now Gerald Grey had become her idol. Formerly her soul had centered upon her work. Now her work held only a subordinate place in her heart. She was deplorably in love, and she knew it.

Mrs. Jacob Mulhall prattled a good deal, inconsequent prattle for the most part, which began gradually to bore the other guests. After a while Marner could

bear it no longer, and being a rough man, he had less consideration for her feelings than the other guests appeared to have.

"Say, Mrs. Mulhall," he exclaimed suddenly, in his resonant, deep voice, "all this fool talk of yours don't amount to much, in my calcuation. You ought to travel some to give your notions a pipe-opener and let the draught in a bit. Don't you agree, Mrs. Monckton?"

It was a dreadful way of putting it, but their hostess was equal to the occasion.

"We have not all had your opportunities, I am afraid," she answered with a winning smile. Then, feeling that he had treated one of her guests with discourtesy, she gave him a little snub. "Perhaps it is as well we are not all like you."

Mrs. Mulhall, for her part, said nothing. She was not a stupid woman, and on the instant she saw her attitude of mind reflected. Yes, her tattle was largely "fool talk," as he had so expressively put it. Oddly enough, she felt in no way annoyed. In future she woud "give her notions a pipe-opener."

They spent the afternoon, until tea-time, in roaming about the beautiful garden and admiring the picturesque landscape of Shadcombe Harbour with its fishing craft, backed by the red cliff of the outstanding Ness.

After tea they set out in three cars for Teignbridge.

Teinbridge, at the time this story opens, was the oldest club of its sort in Devonshire. The cricket ground lay between the village of Kingsteignton and the town of Newton Abbot, about six miles from Shadcombe. The river Teign, here a narrow stream, formed the boundary of the cricket-field upon one side. The

pavilion, a thatched bungalow, with a balcony and pergola, was said to date back over a century.

In early Victorian times, Teignbridge Cricket Club was perhaps the most exclusive club in Devon. Even fifty years ago only County families were considered eligible for membership. Each member was entitled to introduce to the club, as his guests, two or three friends, preferably ladies. The members who came in the morning used to bring each a hamper of provisions, all of which were pooled, and then a big lunch was laid out, which lasted about two hours, and was followed by speeches. Towards six o'clock, dancing members and their friends would begin to arrive, and at seven o'clock dancing would begin in the pavilion, and be kept up until the small hours of next day.

Between the dances the dancers used to roam out across the cricket field and wander about the meadows beside the river. Some who did not dance would begin their roamings in the starlight quite early in the evening, and perhaps not reappear in the pavilion until the National Anthem was being played. They were delightful enough, those evenings at Teignbridge, given fine, warm weather, and probably as many hearts were lost out there in the gloaming from first to last, during the generations the club flourished, as in any ball-room in the West Country.

But to-day these joys are gone for ever. Long grass grows upon the cricket-field. The meadows which surround it have become a wilderness. The thatched pavilion is a ruin through which the bleak winds of winter whistle shrilly. Only the silent river remains, and it no longer hears under the star-lit canopy on balmy summer nights, love whispering to love; it no longer sees love shining from glistening eyes, or wit-

nesses those stolen kisses which set pulses beating and hearts throbbing in the days "when all the world was young, lad."

Miss Baily's band, well known some years ago throughout the length and breadth of South Devon, was playing a lilting waltz. Shafts of light shone out from the open door and the little square windows, cutting yellow streaks across the cricket ground and gradually fading into nothingness in the darkness towards the river. Here and there, beside the stream, voices could be heard conversing in subdued tones.

"Is that you, Mr. Marner?"

Two figures were approaching slowly through the gloom. Now they were close to where Marner stood with Yvonne.

"Yes, Miss Baxter," he answered quickly, straightening himself. "Where have you two been all the evening, I wonder?" and he laughed.

"Why, the other side of the stream. There is a little wooden bridge leads over it, some way further up. There is nobody the other side, and it's so lovely there. Shall we show it to you?"

She led the way with Gerald Grey, along the river bank. The moon, which had appeared fitfully, now shone out, revealing couples wandering aimlessly, or seated together upon chairs taken from the pavilion. In the moonlight the flowing river became a stream of diamonds. From the distance the strains of the lilting waltz still reached them. On the still night air the music was strangely soft.

"Here is the bridge, Yvonne," Irene said. "Shall we go across?"

It was a narrow footbridge with a rough hand-rail on either side, and a stile at the further end.

As Irene Baxter had said, the place was desolate enough. An owl floated silently from a tall tree and swept past them like some winged phantom. The place was studded with patches of yellow gorse. It was an ideal spot for lovers. And Marner and Yvonne, as well as Irene Baxter and Gerald Grey, began unconsciously to feel the spell and the influence of their surroundings.

Presently they gradually grew silent. The moon had disappeared again, and the sky was filled with stars. Irene and Gerald had wandered by a by-path, and soon became lost to sight.

"How beautiful it is here," Yvonne murmured almost inaudibly. "Oh, how heavenly all this is after the lights and the rattle of the big cities I have lived in all my life. I should like to stay here forever. I should like always to be just as we are now, you and I together, in this strange darkness and this delightful atmosphere. Don't the surroundings affect you, dear?"

She felt the pressure of her lover's arm upon her own. But he did not speak. She looked up at him. She could discern his face in the darkness, but could not see its expression.

"Hark! What was that?"

Yvonne stopped abruptly.

"Didn't you hear a cry?" she asked.

"Yes, in that direction," he pointed up the river.

"Listen."

They listened intently, but the cry was not repeated. Presently she nestled closer to him.

"I feel nervous, somehow," she said in a lower voice. "That cry has upset me. I wonder who it was. What time is it now?"

Marner looked at his watch.

"Nearly midnight," he said.

Suddenly he shouted.

"Grey."

From the woods across the meadows and far away upon the hills a mocking voice shouted back at him: "Grey—Grey—yaye—aye—aye"

Several times he called, but only the echoes answered.

"Strange," he said. "They can't be far away."

"They may want to be alone," she said thoughtfully. Marner did not answer.

On and on they roamed. How far they walked they had no idea. At intervals they talked in subdued tones of their past, and of the future as they hoped it would be, and as they meant to make it. There were passages in the lives of both which they had no wish to recall.

"You told me once," Marner said suddenly, inconsequently, "you had a collection of letters that have been written to you by strangers while you have been on your tours over the world. Will you show them to me some day? I should like to see them."

"Of course you can read them if you think they would interest you," she answered. "Many were written obviously by very young men, so I forgive the writers. Probably they knew no better. But some were evidently from men of the world, whose impertinence was colossal."

"Did you answer the letters?"

"Very few. And those I afterwards had reason to regret answering. Of course I had proposals of marriage in plenty. But men did not really appeal to me, though I lived so much for them. Until now my truest friends have all been women. You think that strange? Perhaps you don't know that a highly-finished dancer usually appeals more to women than to men. Men see

only the material side of such a performance. Women are attracted by its artistic perfection. I have had letters from women too, many letters. I usually answered those. But you shall see them all if you care to."

They had difficulty in finding the bridge again. The stile, they had not noticed, was almost hidden by furze bushes. Again the moon was shining. For some minutes they stood mid-way across the bridge, gazing down into the water. The stream was shallow here, and the pebbles upon its bed could be made out quite distinctly. They were looking down the river. Now and again a trout would dart like an arrow down the current. No sound was audible but the music in the distance.

Suddenly Yvonne gave a little gasp. An instant later she stood clutching Marner's arm tightly with both hands.

"Look! Look!" she exclaimed in a terrified voice.
"Oh how dreadful!"

Marner leant across her, and peered down at the water into which she was now staring with wide-open, horrified eyes. Along the bed of the river something was slowly rolling. Forced onward by the current, it turned heavily over and over. It was the body of a man. The face was discoloured. The arms lay flat against the body's sides. They seemed to be bound or pinned there.

Again it rolled over; and again, and again. And every time it did so, its outline grew gradually fainter. In a minute the Thing had disappeared, and once more on the river's bed only pebbles could be seen.

CHAPTER XXI

WAS IT A CLUE?

If you leave a certain village, near London, by the main road, you will come to a gate on the left side, about a mile out. There is nothing particularly striking or unusual about this gate. The gravelled path on to which it opens looks as though it might lead up to one of the rather ostentatious stucco buildings which are plentiful in that district.

In point of fact, the place to which the gravelled path leads is a charming old farm-house. True, the house to-day hardly resembles the sort of farm-house we conjure up in our imagination. Its interior has been renovated and made habitable and extremely comfortable. Only the rafters of black oak across the ceilings remain to remind you of the house's origin, also the old oaken staircase. Hidden away at the back is an ideal old Dutch garden. Its maze of paths is carpeted with moss, soft to the tread, delightful to walk upon. There are quaint, lichen-grown stone seats, and little natural arbours, and there is a sundial that must have stood there for generations unnumbered.

A pretty woman, wife of an American financier, and herself a daughter of the Stars and Stripes, sat before the fire in the drawing-room, reading. It was a wet, cheerless afternoon in mid-October, and the outdoor aspect was anything but alluring.

"Do you remember," she said suddenly to her companion, turning from her newspaper, "that man we met in California when we were staying at Del Monte? A man named Marner—Wal Marner they called him."

"Quite well," her friend answered. "Why?"

"Only because I have come across his name here in the newspaper, also the name of the woman we saw perform those weird dances in Colorado. You won't have forgotten her. She was billed all over the town in enormous letters, if you remember: YVONNE."

"I shall never forget her."

"What does the newspaper say about them?"

"It refers to some previous report, apparently, about their having seen a dead body rolling along the bed of a stream in the middle of the night, somewhere in Devonshire."

"How very disagreeable. What was the body doing there?"

"It doesn't say, except that it was rolling. What I should like to know is what that man was doing there with Yvonne in the middle of the night. That man had a lurid reputation, I was told, at Del Monte. He is extremely rich, but about the methods he employed to become rich there were some curious stories."

"There always are about people who grow rich. For my part I don't care how a man gets rich, provided he gets rich. That is to say, if the man is a man I am interested in."

"You were interested in Mr. Marner, if I remember."

"I was. He fascinated me. He looked so very bad—I am sure he was. I like wicked people, don't you?"

"Yes—up to a point."

"Up to what point?"

"Well, an out-and-out adventurer wouldn't appeal to

me. But a man—‘just bad,’ I much prefer to a man ‘just good.’”

“So you think that man Marner was more than ‘just bad.’”

“I am sure of it. I heard him spoken of in several cities. And everybody said the same about him, that he was an unscrupulous scoundrel who ought to be in jail.”

“And yet he managed to keep out of jail. How adorable! I worship men with brains.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the other.

“And if I ever marry, I shall marry a man with a giant brain, just as you have done.”

“Yes, my husband is certainly no fool, but thank goodness he isn’t the sort of man you want to marry.”

“I don’t want to marry.”

“My dear, none of us wants to marry, until we meet the right man. I am speaking now of America. I know that here in England there are lots of girls who would accept the first man who proposed. I can’t think why. Marriage can be Heaven. But it can be the other place, too, and it is if you strike the wrong man, believe me. Haven’t I seen, haven’t we both seen, hell exemplified in matrimony times out of number?”

Her companion shrugged her shoulders.

“That is because mutual affinity was lacking,” she said. “After all, twin souls may be knocking about the world, probably they are, but they don’t always meet. But tell me what the newspaper says about Wal Marner. It sounds quite exciting, and romantic, too. I can imagine any man being decoyed by Yvonne. She attracted me enormously. And though her performance embarrassed me, she is a wonderful creature, so graceful and supple.”

Mrs. Jamieson had picked up her newspaper again.

"It only adds," she said, "that though the river was dragged for a week, down as far as Newton Abbot, the body was not found."

"He must have dreamed he saw it. He was probably intoxicated with the fascinating Yvonne and imagined he saw things."

"I can't conceive a man like Wal Marner seeing phantoms. I wonder if we shall ever meet him again?"

"Who, Wal Marner?"

"Why, certainly," the girl answered, laughing. "Do you remember that funny way he had of tying knots?"

"Perfectly, and the box he tied for you."

"He told me the natives of New Guinea used that knot to strangle their children with. He seemed to have travelled everywhere. He said the only other places he had seen where that knot was used were Labrador and Iceland."

"Newfoundland, wasn't it?"

"You are right, Newfoundland. Mrs. Jamieson, why shouldn't we go to Devonshire? You have never been there."

"I am not anxious to go in this weather," she answered. "Are you as anxious as that to meet Mr. Marner once more?"

"I don't care in the least if I never see him again. No, it only occurred to me that it must, from all accounts, be a very beautiful county. Why not go there for a fortnight? It is dull here, and your husband won't be back from America this month."

The girl was Mrs. Jamieson's companion.

After a short silence Mrs. Jamieson said:

"Would you really like to go, Sadie?"

"I really should."

"Then we will. I feel we are getting stale here. We see so few people when Charles is away."

They went to stay in Torquay. The season there was just beginning, and they were delighted with everything they saw. It may have been the contrast presented by the town, its inhabitants and its "atmosphere," to the push and hustle of United States cities which principally appealed to them. Everybody in Torquay seemed so calm, so contented. The very cab-horses had absorbed the sleepiness of the place. At any time in the afternoon rows of them could be seen standing with bent knees and eyes closed, apparently somnolent. Even those with nose-bags showed little sign of life. Fleet Street about noon became comparatively active. For the rest the place recalled to mind the legend of the briar rose.

The old retired Colonel, member of the Shadcombe Club, was spending the afternoon idling on Torquay pier. It was one of his few diversions, and one which seemed to afford him considerable gratification. Now it has already been remarked that the Colonel was an epicure. Thus when he saw two well-dressed women coming along the pier toward him, he pulled himself together, hitched up the knees of his trousers, gave his moustache an extra twist, and metaphorically "cleared for action."

As they approached he guessed their nationality. There was a freedom in their way of talking, an independence in their very walk, which could not be mistaken. He was wondering if by some means he could manage to scrape acquaintance, when the ladies saved him the trouble.

"Can you tell us," one of them asked as they came up, "if the 'Duchess of Devon' excursion steamer calls here this afternoon?"

"The steamer stopped running last month," he answered, raising his hat as he spoke. "Where did you want to go?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular. But there's not much to do here," she laughed, "so we thought a trip round the coast would be pleasant."

"It would be. It would be very pleasant, extremely pleasant—h'm—ha."

The Colonel twisted his moustache again.

"Do you live in Torquay?" they asked some moments later.

"No, in Shadcombe. It is just across the bay. I gather you are strangers here?"

"Sure! We have not been here a week. Would you like to show us around? Have you anything to do?"

"Do I look as if I had?" he chuckled. "Indeed I shall be charmed, if I may have the er-the-ah privilege?"

"The privilege is ours," she laughed. "Then please go right ahead, and we'll follow you right now."

The Colonel, thinking they spoke literally, began to walk ahead of them. But they quickly called him back, laughing at his mistake.

During tea they talked on all sorts of subjects. The Colonel was delighted. This was the most pleasing adventure he had experienced for many a year. Like many who have never travelled, he was prejudiced against Americans, indeed against all people other than our own. The Americans he had come across before had been for the most part loud-voiced, self-assertive, rather aggressive folk. These ladies had only the faintest of "American accents," and he found it rather

pleasant. They were neither loud-voiced nor self-assertive. On the contrary, they seemed deeply interested in everything they saw, in all that he told them, and they asked endless questions. In addition they possessed the saving sense of humour. He was thinking how pleasant it would be to invite them over to Shadcombe one day, when Mrs. Jamieson suddenly said:

"Say, I read in a newspaper last week a story of a dead body floating down a river, somewhere in this part. Did you hear about it?"

"Hear about it?" he exclaimed, looking up. "I should say we did! I know the man who saw it, and the woman. They are staying over at Shadcombe and are going to take a house there."

"My, isn't that strange, now! We know them too, quite well. Marner is the man's name, and the woman's name is Yvonne. We met them in California. Are they married, then?"

"They are going to be; at least so everybody says," and he laughed.

"Have they been in Shadcombe long?" Mrs. Jamieson asked presently.

"They come and go. They first came there last summer—met there accidentally and found they knew each other. Who is the man, Marner? He seems a rough sort of person."

"Oh, he is rough enough," and they both laughed again. "No, I know little about him. He is said to be very rich."

"He appears to be. In Shadcombe there are all sorts of tales about him; but I dare say they are not true."

"There were tales about him in America, too. Say, I must come over to your town and see them. Tell me where they are rooming?"

"Where they are-er-what?"

"I mean where are they staying?"

"Oh, at the principal hotel. Perhaps you would both give me the pleasure of your company at lunch one day."

"Indeed that is vurry, vurry kind of you. We should just love to lunch with the Colonel, shouldn't we, Sadie?"

"I should adore it."

"Then that is settled. I had better make up a little party. I will invite Marner and this lady, Miss Yvonne, though I don't know either very well. I will tell them I have met you, and that you want to meet them again."

"You really are kind."

Thus the afternoon wore away pleasantly enough. When he left them, the Colonel felt that he made a good impression. He glanced at his reflection in an advertisement mirror at Torre Station, and decided that he looked "nothing like his age."

At the club that evening he was full of his exploit. "These ladies from America," he told his cronies, "were really most agreeable. So free from affectation, and so full of the *joie de vivre*," that was one of his favourite phrases. In future he must cultivate Americans more than he had done—though where in Shadcombe he expected to find Americans to cultivate, he did not say.

"Odd their talking about that affair at Teignbridge," one of his listeners presently remarked. "The body was found this morning, floating in the harbour. They mention it in to-night's paper. It has been identified, too. It is the body of an old sailor man who lived at Holcombe, apparently a local character of sorts; though nobody, according to the paper, seems to have

known much about him. He had been strangled, you know."

"Strangled?"

"Yes, by a bit of string tied round his neck, just as poor Miss Ashcombe was strangled. The string was there still, and they say it had some curious knots in it which they hope may serve as some sort of clue to the discovery of whoever strangled him. The body had been weighted, to make it sink, and they think that is probably the reason it rolled along the bed of the river instead of floating. After some days in the water it would naturally come to the surface, unless very heavily weighted."

"Does Marner know about it?"

"Yes. He was in here not long ago. Of course he was very interested to hear the body had been found, particularly as its identity had been established."

CHAPTER XXII

“THE ROUND O”

MARNER had bought a house on the Kingston side of the river, and was beginning already to make his influence felt in the neighbourhood, as he had done in almost every part of the world he had happened to be in. He was always cheery, apparently warm-hearted, and he was hospitable and open-handed. Local philanthropic institutions, bazaars, football and cricket clubs, funds for chronic mendicants, irreclaimable inebriates, homes for starving dogs, paralytic cats, and so forth—he contributed to them one and all and with a very lavish hand. In consequence there was already talk in the district of “approaching” him with a view to tempting him to stand as candidate at the next parliamentary election. For even in the West Country the men and women and electors are only human, and it was therefore natural that they should endeavour to further the interests of a rich man who in return might further their own interests.

It was early in November, and the date of the opening meet of the South Devon Foxhounds had already been advertised. It was to be at a place called Round O this season, a circular wood of pine trees on the further side of Haldon and about eight miles from Shadcombe, where four roads converge. One of these roads leads to Shadcombe, over the top of Kingston; one goes down a steep

hill into Exeter, through various villages ; one joins the main road from Exeter to Chudleigh, by Exeter race-course, one of the oldest racecourses in England ; and one takes you by a circuitous route through many high-banked, twisting lanes down into Starcross and Dawlish.

On the morning of the meet a stream of cars, carriages and four-wheeled cabs could be seen making their way towards Round O from several different directions. On the roads, too, but mostly on the moor itself, were groups of riders, some in pink and some in mufti, all making for the same point. There was what the sporting journals call "a fair sprinkling of equestriennes" among the riders, among whom, coming from the direction of Shadcombe, were Polly Ashcombe with Bobbie Tolhurst in attendance, Vera Trevor, and Mrs. Jamieson and her friend. Alone, some way behind them, came Wal Marner, mounted on a weight-carrying chestnut and riding with a typical Western American seat.

South Devon is by no means an ideal hunting country. The fields are small and cramped, and the banks dividing them are for the most part rotten, or riddled with rabbit holes, so that a horse landing upon the top of one is apt to come to grief whilst changing his leg before jumping off. On the moor itself are many rocks, also pitfalls in the shape of "pockets" and deep cart-ruts overgrown with heather and therefore hidden, to say nothing of the soft, swampy ground, and bogs in the valleys which really are dangerous to strangers hunting in that country. The hunting, too, is second-rate, due to the big woodlands and the bad scenting ground, also to the steep hills in nearly every direction. Still, lovers of the sport get a good deal of fun, and probably the county had produced as many finished horsemen and horsewomen as any to be found elsewhere in England.

The morning was dull, as it usually is in November in that part, but its dullness had not damped the ardour or the spirits of the little crowd gathered about Round O on this particular morning. Wal Marner alone looked subdued. Several of his friends noticed this.

“He seems to be hand in glove with Gerald Grey, these times,” Bobbie Tolhurst observed to Vera Trevor, as the two sat upon their horses watching him. “He bought that animal he is riding from Grey.”

“That may be the reason he is sad,” his companion remarked inconsequently. “How do you like our American friend, Bobbie? She looks uncommonly well on horseback.”

“Which American friend?” he asked dryly.

“Mrs. Jamieson.”

“I think she is quite charming; but I don’t know her very well.”

“Which means that if you knew her better you might find her less charming.”

“Compared to you—yes.”

“Oh!”

Thus they chatted on, as did the rest of the field, until, without warning, hounds began to move off.

As is usual in that country, for the first two hours or more no fox could be found. Cover after cover was drawn blank. The thick heather surrounded by the racecourse also proved tenantless, and so did Luscombe Woods and several likely plantations.

“Look where we are coming to,” Bobbie Tolhurst said presently; he still rode with Vera Trevor. “Do you recollect our picnic last summer, or rather Mrs. Willie’s picnic? It was over there, by Castle Dyke.”

“Do I not! By the way, what has become of that

nice boy, Frank Rawlins, who was staying with Grey at the time? I almost fell in love with him."

"You would, of course," he answered, smiling. "I don't know where he is, I am sure. You had better ask Grey."

"But he isn't out to-day."

"Are you in such a hurry as all that? Look out!"

The leading hounds were feathering across the moor, near a farm in a hollow known as Rixtail. Suddenly a hound whimpered. The pack caught the challenge and quickly came together. Now with noses on the ground and tails frantically waving, the whole pack flashed quickly forward. Half-a-minute later hounds were in full cry.

Away they went over the hill, then out on to the moor again. Nobody spoke now. All were galloping hard, for the pace was very hot. Along the hard white roads tore the elderly and the timid, careless of their horses' feet, making for likely points. To right and left horses scrambled over banks. A few turned somersaults, but their riders seemed none the worse. And at the tail of the pack, sailing away over the short heather, Wal Marner and Bobbie Tolhurst could be easily distinguished. The remainder of the field were half-a-mile behind.

The fox skirted Luton, and then he must have doubled, for hounds checked suddenly. Ten minutes later they hit the line again, and headed straight for Lyndridge Park, skirted its home covers, swept round to the left, then, with pace ever increasing, passed up through the sloping meadows above Bishopsteignton and came out on the moor again, heading now for Lustcombe or else for Castle Dyke.

The mist which had been gathering since lunch-time

had by now thickened. As hounds tore across the moor it rapidly grew denser. Soon the pack was lost to sight, though their music could still be heard, and sea and landscape were alike blotted out. Heavier and heavier the fog became. The music of the pack grew fainter, then inaudible. Riders lost sight of and touch with one another. Mrs. Jamieson and her friend and Polly Ashcombe reached a lane just in time. Vera Trevor found herself unexpectedly on the Shadcombe to Exeter Road. For a while Tolhurst and Marner managed to keep together, though it was safe only to trot now, out on the open moor.

And then, all at once, Tolhurst found himself alone.

The fog had by now become so thick, that he was forced to walk his horse. At this pace he rode along over the moor for at least a mile, watchful for “pockets” in the ground, and for a disused stone quarry which lay thereabouts, also all the time on the lookout for some familiar landmark that might help him to discover his whereabouts. Once or twice he reigned up and shouted. But no answer came.

He hoped that he was riding in a straight line, yet realised that he might be making a series of wide circles. He had done that once before on Kingston, in a fog just like this.

Suddenly, out of the white fog, a pine wood rose up before him. In front lay a broad ditch, beyond the ditch a bank. The spot seemed familiar, and yet he could not “place” it. There were so many woods he knew with a ditch and bank boundary.

He turned to the right and rode along beside the ditch. It ended abruptly after about two hundred yards, and the cover became a plantation. The plan-

tation was enclosed in wire rabbit-netting, so he struck away to the right again along an old foot-track.

Soon he had lost the track, and was again out on the heather. The fog was as thick as ever. He came to a steep downward slope and pulled up to consider what he had better do.

All at once he thought he heard voices. He stood up in his stirrups, and listened. Yes, somebody was near. This time, instead of shouting, he guided his horse carefully down the steep slope in the direction of the voices.

His horse's hoofs made hardly a sound upon the heather and the moss-grown peat. Now the voices were quite near, though the fog obscured the speakers. Hark! Surely he recognised that voice? He reined up, and listened. It was Gerald Grey's voice. Then he heard a woman's—Irene Baxter's without a doubt, and a rather deep contralto—Why, Miss Yvonne's, of course.

Something impelled him to remain silent, while his horse stood motionless upon the steep slope. Suddenly Grey spoke again:

"How many different impressions have been found there to-day?"

And Irene Baxter's voice answered:

"Four."

"Do any of them match the boot soles?"

"Yes, two sets do. These impressions were not here last Tuesday."

Then Yvonne spoke:

"What about the boots Wal Marner got off the body?"

"The soles of those boots don't fit these foot-prints, but they fit the prints made before the body was recov-

ered from the river,” Grey said. “Those footprints are in the cave still, several close together, to the left and far in.”

“Then that proves our next point,” Irene’s voice said. “How about the string?”

“The knots are the same,” Yvonne answered. “I have the string here that the man was strangled with; Wal Marner got both the string and the boots from the police, but has to return both to them to-morrow.”

“These are the most important clues we have obtained as yet,” it was Grey who spoke now.

“These and the tallow-candle clues,” Irene said. “Well, the next thing is to get away from this cave and find our way back to the road through this dreadful fog. I think I can find the way. Follow me, but keep close behind or you will both get lost.”

An idea occurred to Tolhurst, who by now was feeling excited. He turned his horse, and made his way up the hill again. By the time he reached the top, he found that the fog there had cleared a little. He could see the outline of the wood now, that he had skirted some minutes before. He identified it, and at once knew where he was. He guessed, too, the road that Grey, Irene Baxter and Yvonne would take, if they were now going home, as they probably would be. He jogged slowly along across the heather until he came to that road. There he dismounted and waited.

Yes, the fog was at last really lifting. He could see quite a hundred yards all around him now. After waiting about a quarter of an hour he discerned three forms coming up the road towards him. Now he saw they were two women and a man. He waited for them to approach.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHOSE WAS THE HAND?

WHEN Grey, Yvonne, and Irene came up, Tolhurst expressed surprise at meeting them. His horse had gone lame, he said. He thought it had picked up a stone, but now fancied it had been pricked in shoeing.

"We walked up after lunch," Irene said, looking him straight in the eyes, "in the hope of seeing something of the hounds. Then this dreadful fog suddenly swept over the moor, and we lost ourselves."

"Where have you come from now?" he asked carelessly, squinting at his cigarette as he lit it.

"I couldn't tell you. We must have been in Luscombe Wood, I think."

Tolhurst peered at her curiously. "What an unconscionable little liar you are," was his mental comment, but he only asked:

"Are you going home?"

"Yes, if this fog doesn't thicken again. We shall keep to the road this time."

He walked a little way with them, leading his horse. Where the road joins the Haldon road from Exeter to Shadcombe, they saw a closed car coming slowly along, going towards Shadcombe. As it approached, Grey recognised Tom, Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur.

"Have you seen Miss Polly?" the chauffeur asked, as he pulled up. "I have been sent out to try to find her. Miss Polly was expected home for lunch."

Grey said he had last seen her about two hours before. There was no fog then. She was just behind hounds, which were then running towards Lyndridge.

"If you are going back to Shadcombe you had better give us a lift," he ended.

The chauffeur opened the door, rather reluctantly, Tolhurst thought. They were all surprised to see that a police officer was inside. They had not noticed him before.

"Hullo," Grey said, "having a joy ride, eh?"

It was the Chief Constable who had given evidence at Ella Ashcombe's inquest. Now he looked embarrassed, but he smiled fatuously.

Tolhurst, riding slowly homeward, when the car had gone on ahead, pondered the incident that had just occurred. He knew approximately the spot where the three had been standing when he heard them talking in the fog, and from what they had said he gathered they must have been examining some cave.

But why should they be interested in a cave on the moor? He knew of several caves, but they contained nothing. From what he had heard Irene and the others say, however, there were apparently bootprints in that cave, and they wanted to identify them. Possibly there was something there besides bootprints. They had talked about a body, evidently the body recovered in Shadcombe Harbour. What on earth could they know about that? And why did it interest them? And why had Marner obtained from the police the dead man's boots, also the bit of string with which the man had been strangled? Really the whole thing was very queer. What made it queerer was the fact that Irene Baxter had just lied to him deliberately when he had asked where they had been. Why should she have done

that? What need had she to conceal the fact that they had been visiting a cave? Under normal conditions nothing would have been more natural than for one of them to say just what they had been doing. Obviously, then, they were keeping their movements on the moor that afternoon secret for some specific reason. What could the reason be?

All the way home he turned this over in his mind. It was not until after he had seen his horse groomed and fed, and was making his way on foot to his house, that another thought struck him. Wasn't it rather peculiar for a constable, even a Chief Constable, to be driving about Haldon in a car? If the constable was on duty, it was certainly irregular. And if not on duty, would he have been in uniform? He had not seen him at the meet in the morning, so the man could not have been returning from there.

Grey and his friends met Mrs. Ashcombe on the steps of her hotel as they alighted from the car. They "hoped she did not mind their having asked her chauffeur to drive them back," and of course she was glad they had done so. She at once suggested their all having tea together. Polly had just got back, she said and was upstairs changing.

They had nearly finished tea when Wal Marner strolled in. He was in hunting mufti, and his appearance somehow made them think of a Western American cow-puncher.

"This is the first time I've hunted with fox-hounds," he said as he seated himself, "and I can't say I'm struck in a heap by the sport. I've seen better sport out west, far better. It is too much of a sham for me—what you call here 'artificial.' Give me an Express rifle and come with me up into the Rockies and I'll show you what I

call sport. With this fox-hunting game you are messing about most of the time doing nothing. It was past one o'clock before we found a fox—and then we didn't see him. I don't believe anybody saw him, not even the dogs."

Grey corrected him.

"Ho, 'hounds' are they? Not 'dogs.' Say, they looked to me mighty like dogs, anyway. What's the difference?"

He was in better spirits than he had been at the meet. All the time he talked, Yvonne's gaze was fixed upon his face. It was easy to see how desperately she was in love with him. The talk, however, was mostly commonplace. It was not until Marner and Yvonne were alone, an hour later, in Marner's sitting-room, that incidents were broached which have a bearing upon the story.

"Well?" Marner asked briskly, as he came out of his bedroom, where he had been to change his clothes: "Well? Did you find anything?"

"We made a few discoveries."

"Have you brought the boots back, and the string?"

"They are in that parcel," and she pointed to it.

"Good. And now tell me what you found."

She explained all in detail, but it did not amount to much. What she told him was little more than what Tolhurst had overheard in the fog.

"Anyway that settles the point about old Joe Soper," Marner said, when she had finished. "And it's a good job he's dead. I couldn't have felt safe as long as he was alive and knew of my whereabouts. I wondered all along if that body we saw rolling down the river that night could by any possibility be his. When I told Watkins, at the inn, that day in Newton Abbot, I had

no use for Joe, and that if Joe died soon someone might be the richer, meaning Watkins himself, I hardly thought he would take me at my word. Gee! what a relief when I read in the paper, that evening at the club, that the body found in the harbour was Joe Soper's. It took me all my time not to stand drinks round. 'A local character,' that's what the papers called him, and added that little was known about him. I guess I knew enough about him, and a bit more, and him about me."

His companion said nothing. She did not like to hear him talk like that. She knew, of course, that there would be no possibility of the old sailor-man's death being traced to Marner, even indirectly, but it pained her to see how reckless her lover still seemed to be, how indifferent to crime. True, from what Marner had told her, she knew that as long as Joe Soper lived there would ever remain a possibility of his blackmailing him, or worse. Therefore she, too, was glad that the man was now dead. But she would have felt happier in her mind had he died a natural death instead of being put out of the world in that terrible manner.

And as she thought about him again, that awful vision she had beheld in the moonlight at the bottom of the river, that dreadful Thing rolling over and over along the bed of the stream in the stillness of the night, rose up again before her. Unconsciously she put her hands over her eyes, with a sudden, spasmodic gesture.

Next day Irene Baxter went back to town. From first to last she had picked up a good deal of information, most of it of a vague sort, bearing indirectly upon Ella Ashcombe's death, and she now wanted to gather it all up and try to fit more pieces of the puzzle together. Parts of it already fitted, but most of the

parts had yet to find their places. Mental jig-saws of this description had always appealed to her, and the putting of them together formed always the basis of her work. Never before, however, had she tackled a jig-saw which needed such perseverance and determination to put complete as the Holcombe Mystery. For now she had again determined that she would solve the riddle.

Like a good many other people, she had a habit, when she wanted to think long and carefully and without interruption, of going into a cinema theatre; cinemas were then less numerous than they are now. There, in the semi-darkness, with soft music playing, and the pictures passing ever before her eyes, she found her faculty of mental concentration wonderfully stimulated. As some men can think and talk best whilst mechanically drawing or making marks with a pencil upon their blotting-paper, so she was able to think most logically whilst mechanically watching moving pictures.

The show had just begun when she made her way into the already darkened theatre and stumbled into the corner seat allotted to her by the attendant. Pictures of Scottish scenery were passing along the screen. For some minutes she watched them with interest. Then, as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, her mental faculties began, as usual, to be affected by her surroundings and the atmosphere they created.

Soon her train of thought was busy, and she watched the pictures only subconsciously. Going right back to the week when she had first gone to Shadcombe, and had first met Grey, all that she had seen and heard since then seemed to grow into her imagination. There were those peculiar knots in the string with which Ella Ashcombe had been strangled, the marks on the wall outside

the window of Ella's room, made apparently by hob-nailed boots, the bit of tallow candle she had found among the rubbish in the garden, the brass brad she had found in the window sash, the Chief Constable's curious embarrassment at the inquest, the hints the cook, dismissed by Mrs. Ashcombe, had let drop, and the incident during the night when Polly had suddenly come face to face with her at the head of the stairs. Later came the scraps of indirect clues which she had picked up whilst disguised as a yokel in an inn, the discovery and then the mysterious disappearance of the bundle with the letters, the portrait, and the bit of candle in it, which had been, so it was said, tied up with tarred twine. She remembered also the murdered girl's injured finger, and the disorder the room had been found in. Then there were Mrs. Jacob Mulhall's tales, to which she attached little importance, and remarks that Milo had made to her, to which she attached more importance, also Milo's letter from Marner, who was then in California, which she had steamed open and read and then stuck down again, while she was staying with Milo in Torquay.

She thought of Yvonne's letter from Marner, referring to the cave near Castle Dyke, her subsequent intimacy with Yvonne, their discovery together of the cave on the afternoon of the picnic, when Gerald Grey had been with them. After that she thought again of the various visits she had paid to the cave, sometimes alone, sometimes with Grey or with Yvonne, or both, and the several clues the visits had revealed, especially on the occasion of their last visit there together in the fog some days before. Also, there was that mysterious attempt to murder Wal Marner, which had resulted in his chauffeur being killed. Not a trace had been dis-

covered of the man who had fired those shots—she was still convinced the would-be assassin was a man. Then, quite recently, came that curious affair of finding in Shadcombe Harbour the dead body of Joe Soper, the old man she had seen at the inn, each time intoxicated, on the nights she had gone there in disguise.

It could hardly be a coincidence, she reflected, that both Ella Ashcombe and Joe Soper should have been strangled with a bit of string, each bit with apparently the same peculiar sort of knots tied in it. And she had heard Marner speak about peculiar slip-knots used by the natives of New Guinea to strangle their young. Could these slip-knots have been tied in the same way as those used by the New Guinea natives? If so

Linking these and many other scraps together as best she could, she finally came to a decision. She believed that both Ella Ashcombe and Joe Soper had been strangled by men in similar walks of life, and that whoever the criminals were, both must at some time or other have been in New Guinea, Iceland, or Newfoundland. Also she believed that both must have been acquainted, and that both had at one time been sailors, or in some way associated with the sea or with ships. Further, she was inclined to think that Marner had known them at some time or other, that he knew a good deal about both crimes, and that he had told Yvonne a good deal of what he knew, but not all. Yvonne, unfortunately, in spite of her friendship, was extremely secretive on some subjects. Then there was Milo. She felt perfectly positive that Milo could throw light upon the crime, if he wished to. And why didn't he wish to?

Yes, Yvonne knew why he didn't wish to, and so did Marner. She felt she now need no longer discover

the actual murderer by trying to discover actual clues. There was a little group of people, all of whom had some knowledge of the crime yet not one of them was in the least suspected—except by herself—of knowing anything about it, or being in any way interested in it. Also Mrs. Ashcombe's husband was still as mythical as ever.

Irene Baxter had of course no knowledge of Marner's interview with the old Newfoundlander named Watkins, at the inn in Newton Abbot, who had informed him of the death of Mrs. Ashcombe's husband. Nor had she the least suspicion that Joe Soper's death had been the outcome of that interview.

She had been an hour in the picture show when the films came to an end, and the lights were slowly turned up. During that time she had obtained a better insight into what had probably taken place before Ella Ashcombe's death than she had ever done before. Also, she had more or less decided what her future plans must be. Roughly, they consisted in her increasing her intimacy with Marner and Yvonne, and getting into touch, so far as she could—and in doing this her disguises would help her—with seafaring men, especially men who had visited Newfoundland at frequent intervals during the past ten years. That crucifix found in the fire might also lead to an important discovery. It must have belonged to Ashcombe, of that she felt sure, and whoever he might be, he too had been in some way associated with the sea, and with Newfoundland fishermen. Perhaps even Mrs. Jamieson might be worth cultivating. Apparently she had seen a good deal of Marner in America, and heard a lot about him there. Marner, she had already concluded, had been an adventurer most of his life, and to a great

extent a scoundrel. She must find out who else he knew in England—and in Ireland. Within the last two months he had been three times to Ireland, remaining there on each occasion at least a week or ten days.

CHAPTER XXIV

HARD HIT

“Most men can make money,” runs an old saying, “but it takes a clever man to keep it.”

Milo, like most men and women of Eurasian extraction, was of a cool and calculating disposition with a substratum of cunning in his nature, a man who never forgot an injury or a fancied injury, and who would do his best to be avenged, though he might have to wait years for the opportunity.

Yet, like the rest of his race, quick impulsiveness smouldered beneath a calm exterior, and there were times when he would throw prudence to the winds and risk all on a single coup. Thus it came about that, after careful deliberation, after his interview with the money-lender, he decided upon a mad act—to attempt to win the £15,000 he saw he would have to pay by a big turf speculation.

He knew nothing about horses, and had never followed form or indulged in any of those abstruse studies and calculations by means of which men and women of small intelligence, but wide optimism, and with great belief in Luck, often endeavour to amass money. Until now, indeed, he had held such folk in contempt and looked down upon them with a mild feeling of pity, believing them to be, in the majority of cases, mentally incapable of realising their folly. It was therefore

strange that, in spite of his undoubted ability and ordinarily sound judgment, he was now about to embark upon a gamble, which, had anybody else been about to do so, he would have considered sheer stupidity.

Though racing in no way appealed to him, included among his acquaintances were a number of racing men, some of them clients of his, also men whose profession it was to earn, or attempt to earn, a livelihood by betting upon horse-races.

At the office of one of the latter in London, he called some days after his visit to the usurer whom he had eventually succeeded in inducing to give him a full week's grace.

"Certainly," his friend said, when Milo had explained to him what he meant to do, "what you suggest can easily be managed. Of course, you know," he added, "that 'legitimate' racing has not yet started, so that you will have only jumping races to bet upon. And getting on jumping races is very risky work."

"All betting is risky work, I consider," Milo answered dryly. "But to me that is immaterial at the present time. I want to win a big sum, which will be paid at once."

His friend smiled.

"That is what we all want to do," he said, "but it takes a bit of doing, believe me. I've been at the game for years, myself, and I rarely make more than five per cent. per annum on the capital I invest, betting month in, month out. I have pulled off some big coups, I admit, but they come rarely. How soon do you want to start your gamble?"

"At once, the sooner the better."

"Very well. Lunch with me to-morrow at twelve o'clock, and we will go on together afterwards to a

friend of mine who has a tape. You will find there six or eight others, not more, all men you will like, I think. I have an appointment now, so must leave you."

The house to which they repaired next day was in a quiet street in the West End. Milo's friend presented him to the host and to a gentleman with a Semitic cast of countenance, who took them both into his smoking-room, where they had whiskies and sodas. Other men were there already, to whom Milo was introduced. They were mostly men of sharp features, quick of movement, with intelligent eyes. Milo was warmly welcomed. There is a strange sort of freemasonry amongst gamblers and turf speculators to be found in hardly any other walk of life, a kind of *bonhomie* which at first is very pleasant. Later it may prove less so, as, for instance, when a member of the coterie finds himself unable to meet his liabilities, his "debts of honour," as they are called.

"It is one o'clock, gentlemen," the host said presently, glancing at his watch. "Shall we adjourn, if you are ready? Come with me," he ended, turning to Octavius Milo. "I will show you the way."

They passed along a short corridor, then turned to the right.

The room they entered was not large. At one side stood a tape-machine, already ticking out news to do with racing. There was a big square table in the middle of the room on which were blank paper, pencils, pens, ink and blotting-paper, and some copies of racing guides and annuals, and books of form and also a pile of sporting daily papers. Comfortable arm-chairs stood here and there, and there was a sideboard with decanters, siphons, bottles and tumblers upon it. Fac-

ing the tape was a small table upon which lay a closed ledger, and near it a revolving chair.

Milo's friend picked up the tape, and glanced at it carelessly.

"Matchstand goes after all, I see," he said. "I thought he would. He ought to about get home with the light weight he is carrying."

The other men gathered about him, and began to read the tape. The jargon they talked conveyed little to Milo, but he listened, interested.

Presently the host went over to the small table, pulled up the revolving chair, seated himself, and then opened the ledger. He turned over several leaves, ran his finger down some columns of names and figures, then took the receiver off the hook of the telephone transmitter which stood beside the ledger.

"A hundred each way on Laughing Gas," he said.

"Right," and he replaced the receiver.

When he had made an entry in the ledger, he lit a long cigar, then lay back in his chair, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Mix me a brandy and soda, one of you fellows," he called out.

One of them did so, and brought it to him. He drank half of it at a gulp, then put the tumbler down.

The tape was ticking again.

"They all go in the first race," somebody standing by the machine said. "Fifty each way Boulter's Lock, Mark."

"Done," the host answered, making an entry in a different column.

"What will Boulter's Lock start at?" Milo inquired carelessly.

"A pretty long price," answered the man who had just backed it. "Nine or ten to one, I should say."

Milo strolled over to his host, and murmured something.

"A monkey on Boulter's Lock," the latter said in an undertone, and entered the bet.

Milo murmured again.

"I've done with the animal myself, now," the host replied, "but if you want to back it for another monkey, I can get the money on for you," and again he picked up the receiver.

"No, that will do."

"I don't mind telling you now," the host said, looking up at him, "that Boulter's Lock, though he can stay the course, is quite likely to fall. If it was John, M.P. now, it would be different. Ever seen him run?"

"Seen what run?"

"John, M.P."

"Never."

"He jumps sideways and is as safe as houses. I laid four to one on him once—foolish thing to do, I admit in a jumping race—and he romped home. But Boulter's Lock—well, he would not start at ten to one or more for nothing now, would he? He'll fall, you mark my words! I shouldn't be surprised if he started at twelve to one."

"Off!" somebody near the tape exclaimed.

They all gathered about the little marble pillar upon which stood the machine of polished brass, and now waited in silence. Only three had backed anything in the first race, and only Milo and the man who had first mentioned Boulter's Lock had backed that animal.

Presently the machine began to buzz again. Then

it started ticking. Out came the letters in nervous little jerks.

1-30. B-o-u-l-t-”

“Boulter’s Lock wins, Mark!” two men exclaimed in chorus.

“You don’t say,” answered the host, without looking round. Again he made an entry. “And I was sure he would fall. Congratulations, Mr. Milo.”

Milo’s face was expressionless.

Laughing Gas was second, the favourite nowhere. Presently the tape ticked out: “Betting: Boulter’s Lock, 16 to 1,” and added the prices of the second and third horse.

“Didn’t I tell you, Mr. Milo?” remarked the host. “They made sure that he would fall—and so he didn’t. Eight thousand pounds. Not a bad win to start with. A pity you didn’t back him for a place too. I always back ’em both ways, or almost always.”

The host’s clients backed their various “fancies” in the next two races. In each Milo backed one for a “monkey,” and both horses won, one at four to one, and one at two to one, thus placing a further £3,000 to his credit. In the next race he backed the favourite for £1,000 and it won by a neck.

“You are the luckiest man I have met for a long time,” one of his new acquaintances said, laughing. “And I understand that you never back horses.”

“Only very rarely,” Milo answered. “Until to-day I have never backed a horse for more than a five-pound note.”

“Well, it’s the old racing superstition come true again—a beginner is always lucky. Perhaps you will make the exception and go on lucky. I hope so, I am sure. You have the right spirit and plenty of

pluck, so you deserve to prosper. I would no more have thought of backing Flyaway to-day as you did, than I would of flying away myself," and he smiled at his little pun. "She's a brute, really. One day she'll run out, the next day she'll refuse, the next day she'll make a false start, and the next day she'll do everything she ought to do, just as she has done to-day, most likely. Now, what about this next race? It ought to be a walk over for Petite Fille on book form. There's nothing else in it except Bog Oak. What are you backing, Mr. Milo? I can't go far wrong to-day if I follow your advice."

Milo was now £12,000 to the good. Of this only a proportion was owed to him by his host. The remainder his host had placed on commission with other agents by telephone. Reviewing the situation calmly, as he sipped a whisky and soda, Milo decided to stop. The balance of £3,000 which he still needed to complete the £15,000 he had set out to win, he could pay without running further risks by betting. He had not expected to win the full amount in one day, and his phenomenal luck had surprised him. Then, reflecting that though in luck to-day he might not be in luck to-morrow, and being, in addition, unconsciously attracted by a game which until now he had looked upon as a fool's game, he decided to tempt fortune just once more. He would back something in the next race, the last but one, for £1,000, something starting at not less than three or four to one. How satisfactory if, instead of winning only the £15,000 he needed, he were to end the day with £1,000 or £2,000 over and above that sum. He would then indeed have played Fate a nasty trick.

"I am backing Pooh Bah this time," he called out

to his host. "A thousand to win, and a monkey a place."

"Right."

The bet was duly booked.

Ten minutes later the result came upon the tape. Pooh Bah had started at six to one and was one of the "also ran." Later the tape told them that Pooh Bah had fallen at the dry ditch.

There was only one more race. Milo, who by now had drunk more whisky and soda than was his wont, backed the second favourite for £1,000 each way, and lost.

"I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again to-morrow, I hope?" his host said affably, shaking him by the hand, as they all prepared to leave.

"I expect so," Milo answered, laughing. "I have had great luck to-day—except in the last two races."

"You have indeed, Mr. Milo. And I hope the same luck will follow you to-morrow."

"Not only follow, but overtake me," Milo replied jocosely.

"Overtake you. Yes. Ha, ha, that is very good. You will have another drink before you go? And a cigar, yes? Try one of these; they are excellent I assure you," and he produced an enormous gold cigar-case from his inside breast-pocket.

Alone in his bedroom at an hotel that evening, Milo thought over the events of the afternoon. The effect of the whisky had worn off, and his brain was quite clear. It seemed to him extraordinary that he should have had such luck, and yet

Well, plenty of people he knew seemed to have luck in backing horses. Perhaps all were not such fools

as he had hitherto considered them. Perhaps, after all, it was possible to win money consistently by backing horses. True, the animals he had backed that afternoon he had picked out quite haphazard, just as he might have drawn lucky lottery tickets, for he knew nothing about racing. Then his better judgment prevailed, and he knew that backing horses was really, what he had so often termed it, "a mug's game." He ought to stop it. He ought to have stopped when he was £12,000 to the good, instead of going on and losing £3,500 of it. No, he would not go back next day. He would not bet any more. Early in the morning he would ring up his host and say he could not come.

But the next day came, and he did not ring up his host. All the morning he told himself he would, but by noon he had not done so, and by twelve-thirty he had decided that he would try his luck once more. After all, he had not expected to win so much on the first day. What he had hoped was that during the week's grace he still had he would manage to win the total sum he required to meet Mosse & Evelburg's bills. Also he had, upon the whole, enjoyed yesterday afternoon. The lunch had been excellent. Afterwards he had found the company of his new acquaintances congenial. Most of all—though this he did not admit—the suppressed excitement he had felt whilst waiting for the results of the races to come up on the tape, had been intense. In short, without his knowing it, he had contracted the gambling fever.

That afternoon he lost the whole of his winnings, and £3,500 besides. Late in the evening he despatched a long telegram to his confidential clerk in Exeter. Next day he went again to the house in the West End, where his host greeted him more cordially than ever.

By the end of the day's racing he was £6,500 "down," or £10,000 to the bad on the two days, and he still needed the £15,000 in addition to meet the bills on Monday. Again he sent off a telegram. At seven next morning a wire reached him in reply. His clerk was protesting. He cursed him mentally and answered the telegram and went again to the house. This was Friday.

He was gambling with his clients' money now. Friday night saw him a further £8,000 "down," or £18,000 to the bad, also he had drunk so much that he had difficulty in leaving the house. Next day, Saturday, he felt desperate and absolutely reckless. He fancied that his host's greeting was not so cordial as before. Had he known it, his host had been making inquiries about him, ascertaining by telephone through an enquiry agency how much the lawyer was really worth. He entered his bets, however, and during the whole afternoon Milo backed neither a winner nor a placed horse.

His total losses on the week came to £42,000!

In his valise at the hotel where he was staying, was a loaded revolver. He kept one by him always, had done so for years; why, he hardly knew. On the Sunday morning he could eat no breakfast. He felt terribly ill. His temples throbbed. He went up to his room again after leaving the coffee-room, took the revolver out of his valise, and began to examine it.

And as he examined it he thought with deadly hatred of Wal Marner. He was a ruined man now. Worse, he had misappropriated moneys belonging to his clients, and gambled them away. But he did not blame himself. Wal Marner, he told himself, had been the whole cause

of his downfall. But for those forged bills, and what Marner knew about him, the catastrophe which faced him would never have come about.

He slipped the revolver into his great-coat pocket, walked rapidly along the broad corridor, went down the stairs and out into the street.

CHAPTER XXV

MORE CURIOUS FACTS

SEVEN miles out at sea from Shadcombe, midway between Shadcombe and Torquay, is an isolated rock, a thousand or so yards in circumference, known as the Oarstone. It is precipitous and looks like the peak of a mountain jutting up out of the sea. It has only one landing place, and its surface is rugged and has many nooks and crevices.

It was one of those mild days, "muggy" they are called in Devonshire, when you might imagine it was spring instead of autumn. The sea was smooth as glass, the atmosphere so still that sailing boats, twelve and even fifteen miles away, could be distinctly discerned. Irene Baxter and Gerald Grey had chosen this afternoon to sail out to the Oarstone, and they had just finished tea in one of the cosy nooks upon the south side of the little island.

For they were now to all intents engaged to be married. Grey, despite himself, had gradually fallen, victim to Irene's charms, or more rightly to her singular personality. For an hour they had been together in the rocky nook, and Irene had again abandoned herself to one of the strange paroxysms of affection which were so peculiar to her. True, she now no longer found Grey cold or unresponsive. On the contrary, he had folded her in his arms and smothered her with kisses

and told her she was the most beautiful and wonderful creature he had ever met. They spoke of the past, grieving, like lovers will grieve, that they had not known each other, years and years ago.

"Years and years ago," he had answered, smiling, "you were not born. If you said a few years ago, it would mean before you put your hair up, and that would have been soon enough. Show me your hair again, will you? Just as you did that night, in the lanes above Shadcombe."

She had looked up at him with shining eyes. Then, instinctively, she had glanced about her, but of course no one was in sight. For they were quite alone on the rugged island. The only other living things were the seagulls which circled overhead, screaming. One, perched upon a rock within a few yards of them, seemed to watch them with an air of interest. Irene "shooed" it away.

Then with deft fingers she loosened her beautiful hair, as she had done that night when dressed as a yokel, and let it fall over her shoulders and down her back. Grey toyed with it for some moments, and its silky touch intoxicated him again. He took it up in both hands and kissed it.

"I don't think many women have such gorgeous hair as yours," he said presently. "I wish everyone could see it."

She laughed like a child.

"Do you?" she said. "Wouldn't you feel jealous?"

"Not a bit. I should feel proud. I should be proud to think that a girl with hair like this is actually in love with me. You dear little thing! I wonder what strange, hypnotic power it is about you that draws me to you so."

He was stroking her hair still, fondling her, pressing her cheek against his. Their lips met again, and again they kissed and kissed. The seagulls screamed. One swept past so close to them that the wind its wings made fanned their faces.

In the stern of the boat in which they had sailed out to the Oarstone, the old boatman dozed, his chin upon his chest. The boat was out of sight, on the opposite side of the island. The old man had muttered to himself as he had watched them scrambling up the rocks together. He was in the habit of taking young people for a sail, but this was the first time he had ever landed lovers at the Oarstone.

"'Tis a rum notion," had been his final comment. Then he had spat into the sea with some vehemence, as though to emphasise his statement.

After a while they returned to earth, and began to talk rationally. Presently Irene Baxter spoke of Milo.

"When I was in Exeter yesterday," she said, "I saw Mr. Milo. I wonder what can be amiss with him? You know how he has changed lately, but yesterday the alteration in his appearance was quite startling. He looked a different man, and years older. Do you know, Gerald, I think he had been drinking."

Grey did not answer. He was looking straight in front of him, out across the sea.

"Why don't you speak, dear?" she asked in surprise. "Have you heard anything about him?"

"Well, I have," he said some moments later; "but what I have heard may not be true."

"Still, you think it is true," she answererd quickly, watching his face narrowly. "What was it you heard?"

"I ought not to tell you."

"Of course you ought not to. There are lots of

things we ought not to do, but we do them all the same. We ought not to have kissed as we have just been doing, but we did it. I ought not to have let my hair down, and so encouraged you to love me in the shamefaced way you have been doing, but I did it. Come, do tell me."

"You won't repeat it?"

"Oh, don't be silly. Do I ever tell things? I am not a Mrs. Jacob Mulhall."

"Well, rumours, well-founded rumours, have reached me that Milo has ruined himself by gambling, that he did it quite suddenly—he never used to gamble, so far as I know—and that in addition he has misappropriated and squandered a large sum of money entrusted to him by clients."

"Knowing what I do about him, I can't be surprised at that," she answered. "And if what you hear is true, it means, of course, that he will be arrested and disgraced."

Grey nodded.

"He's a crook and always has been, so I don't feel sorry for him. No wonder he looks changed and worried. When I saw him yesterday he looked like a man contemplating suicide."

"Possibly he is. You will hear all about it soon."

They continued to talk about Milo for some time. Then Grey looked at his watch.

"It is time we went back," he said in a tone of regret. "Have you enjoyed your afternoon, little girl?"

"Have I! I shall not forget this afternoon. I shall never, never forget it."

"Nor I. Nor this island. We must come out here again. It is so peaceful and so quiet."

"Except for the seagulls. I didn't like the way that gull looked at me, a bit, while I was loosening my hair. He looked quite reproachful."

At last they reached the top of the island again. The little boat lay anchored right beneath them, in a sort of cove or natural harbour. They could hear the water lapping its sides. The boatman still slumbered. Grey shouted to him, and he awoke with a start, and began to look about him, blinking. When he caught sight of them, he slowly stood up in the boat, then threw out the plank for them to walk across.

The jar of ale that Grey had left for the boatman was now much lighter than when he had lifted it in at starting. It may have been for that reason that the old boatman, taciturn and morose on the outward voyage, now became loquacious. While attending to the sail, he began voluntarily to enlighten them on various interesting points. He told them his age, how long he had been in Shadcombe, whereabouts he lived there, the number of years he had been married, how his sons were employed and to whom his daughters were "tokened." He also aired his views freely on the town, the way it was managed, and how much better it would be managed if he had a say; what he thought of the County Council and the Urban District Council, and then went on to criticise the behaviour of various well-known residents. There was one member of the club he seemed to hold in high esteem, a gentleman of considerable literary ability, who, after roaming the world over, had come to reside in the town. "A wonnerful clever gentleman," was the way he described him, "an' what 'ee don't know 'bout deep-sea fishing baint worth knowing, ah tell 'ee. A proper

sport, 'ee be, a proper sport, an' no mistake, an' wonderful clever," he repeated.

"I suppose you have yourself travelled a great deal," Irene presently remarked carelessly, as she watched the water rushing between the fingers of the hand she had hung down over the boat's side.

"I have that, miss," he answered, tapping the ashes out of his pipe. "There baint many countries I ain't been in in my time."

"Were you in the Navy?"

He gave a great laugh.

"Navy? Naw, miss, Ah baint bin in the Navy. A've bin all my life on traders, since I were a nipper. A've been mate and first mate on a score of 'em, or more, I 'ave."

"Tell us where you have been."

"Tell 'ee where? Why, everywhere, ah tell 'ee. I was two years in the fisheries in Newfoundland, an' I'd like to be there now."

"Oh! Is Newfoundland a nice place?"

"Mebbe yew'd think it nice, miss, and mebbe yew wouldn't. There's good money to be got there—in the fisheries."

"You knew lots of fishermen and sailors there, I suppose?"

"Any number, miss. Some I knew is 'ome now, living here 'bouts."

He had been stuffing black shag into his pipe. He stopped talking while he lit it. Then he went on:

"You heard tell o' Joe Soper as was drowned some time ago—leastways his body was picked up in the 'arbour, 'an un says ee'd bin strangled. Ah knew Joe Soper well. Known un years, in St. John's, an'

then 'ere. 'Ee baint no loss, Ah reckon. Gude job 'ee be dade."

"But why? What had he done?"

"What 'ad 'ee done? Awe, what 'ave 'ee not done. 'Ee'm best dade, miss. That's all Ah can tell 'ee 'bout 'ee."

"But what makes you say that? Did he do you some harm?"

"Not me, miss. Naw, not me. But other folks. 'Ee done 'em 'arm enough, Ah reckon."

He spat over the side again and continued:

"Now 'ee be dade, baint no 'arm to tell 'ee some, Ah reckon. Was you 'ereabouts, miss, last February, when young leddy up long at 'O'combe were found strangled in 'er bade?"

"I was here about that time."

"Well, Ah tell 'ee," the boatman lowered his voice, "Ah tell yew 'ee knowed more 'bout that 'ere affair than mebbe think upon."

"Why, what could he have known?"

"'Ee knawed 'oo done ut. I'd make so bold as say he 'elped un. Awe, a bad lot, Joe Soper, a shockin' bad lot. Gude job 'ee be dade."

This was getting interesting. Grey suggested to the boatman that she should have another drink of beer, and the man did so with alacrity.

"There's others 'bout 'ere knaws 'bout un tu," he went on when he had wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and pushed the bung back into the jar. "Ther's that Chief Cons'ble, Jeffries. Ah knawed 'ee tu, in Iceland. 'Ee baint not much gude, neither. Gude job if 'ee were' dade tu. Chief Cons'ble!" he snorted. "Perty fine Chief Cons'ble 'ee be. 'Ee'd orter be in clink, that's wher' 'ee orter be."

"Does he know about the murder, too?"

"Du 'ee knew? Aye, 'ee du. But tain't no business o' mine, no, o' cors not. Ah didn't orter talk like this to the likes o' yew tu, miss."

"Indeed you ought to," Grey cut in. "Don't think that we shall repeat anything you say, or get you into trouble. Talk as freely as you like."

"Awe, if that be then A'll tell 'ee more. There's that 'er rich gent come t' live 'ere, tuk a big place over Kingston way; yew knows un right nuff, that 'ere feller, Marner. Rich? I should say 'ee be. But Ah remembers un when he 'adn't got much. 'Ee were in St. John's tu. And afore that Ah met 'en in Fiji and in Honolulu and in New Guinea. Ah tell'd 'ee Ah travelled. Ah knaws all about 'ee tu. Pity 'ee baint dade. T'ole lot of 'em should be dade, be rights. They're a bad lot. A shockin' bad lot t'ole lot of 'em."

They were now approaching Labrador, the little cottage built into the face of the perpendicular red cliff, about a mile from Kingston. Probably it was so named by one of the many fishermen who went out to Newfoundland and Labrador generations ago, and subsequently came back to their native country to die. In the summer, trippers in their thousands flock to Kingston's Labrador, a popular tea-house now. From two miles out at sea it looked picturesque enough, nestling in the sheltering cliff.

It may have been that the stimulating effect of the beer was beginning to wear off, or that the gentle motion of the boat began to dull his senses, for the boatman gradually became taciturn again. Grey and Irene tried in turn to draw him on to say more, but his tongue was apparently tired. Perhaps he realised that

he had talked more freely to these strangers—apparently he had not seen Grey before—than prudence warranted. Cleverly enough he brought the boat round until she headed straight for the harbour entrance. A strong outward current was running, and this necessitated his tacking often, an operation which needed all the care and attention he could bring to bear upon it.

When they had landed, Irene turned to the boatman.

"Here is something for yourself, over and above what we owe for the boat," she said, and pushed a sovereign into his horny palm. "You are a very good boatman, and we would like you to take us always. What is your name?"

The old fellow thanked her profusely. Never before had any of his clients treated him like this. Then he gave her his name, and told her again where he lived.

As they walked across the Den, Irene seemed in high spirits.

"Isn't that splendid?" she exclaimed. "That old man has just the information we have been seeking for months past. We shall get every bit out of him before we've done. I wish we had met him before. I will go and see his wife one day—he seems so fond of her—and that will give him more confidence in us still. Gerald, I believe that man will tell us enough before we have done with him to enable us to accomplish our task after all. Oh, how fine it will be if, after all, I am able to find out who caused Ella Ashcombe's death!"

CHAPTER XXVI

ANOTHER SENSATION

MEANWHILE, contrary to all the theories of morality, Marner flourished exceedingly. He had bought a beautiful house overlooking the river Teign, and away beyond the river the landscapes presented by Dartmoor with Hay Tor, Hound Tor, Bag Tor and others tors outlined against the sky, made a lovely background which Yvonne, with her artistic nature, never grew tired of contemplating.

The townspeople, however, though they liked Marner personally in spite of his bluff, outspokenness and rather rough exterior, were gradually beginning to talk. It was all very well to say that this big man, who spent money so freely and entertained so lavishly, was going to marry the fascinating dancer who was ever his companion, what they wanted to know was—why did he not marry her as he was now in a position to do so?

If Marner and Yvonne knew what was being said, they paid not the slightest heed. Perhaps they were too deeply engrossed in each other to have thoughts for anything else. They were still invited everywhere. Indeed, so attractive did Yvonne prove, that for a week Vera Trevor almost foreswore her allegiance to Mrs. Willie Monckton in order to fall in love with the partly foreign dancer, but she pulled up just in time. As for Mrs. Willie, the whole storm in a tea-cup af-

furnished her great amusement. It was not to be supposed that she entirely approved of this violent platonic friendship between Marner and Yvonne; but, as she aptly observed, "If they choose to get themselves talked about, surely that is their affair. I can't see what business of ours, or of anyone in Shadcombe, it is to carp and cavil. As for Mrs. Mulhall, I call her, to use her own phrase, quite unspeakable. She is a mischief-making undesirable, and should be put under restraint."

The other chief source of gossip in the town at that period was Octavius Milo, and the change that had come over him. At one time it had been rumoured that Polly Ashcombe was "setting her cap" at Milo, another characteristic phrase of Mrs. Jacob Mulhall's. And perhaps there had been truth in the report. Polly Ashcombe, as we know, was a pert little person, self-centred and rather selfish. Also she had ambition of a mild sort. She had sometimes confided to her few friends that she "meant to marry well," and, so far as she could see, Octavius Milo appeared to possess the attributes she sought. He was quite good-looking, after a rather peculiar type, he was always well-groomed, he had a good legal connection, and was certainly not penniless. She had heard it said, too, that his *clientèle* was rapidly increasing. Of course she did not love him, but that was not of consequence. He seemed quite to like her—he smiled and was very pleasant whenever they met in the street—and she was utterly bored at home.

Therefore his altered appearance worried her a good deal. Fag ends of stories, too, had been reaching her of late. There were rumours, and rumours within rumours. He was drinking secretly. He had been jilted

by a widow. He was on the verge of bankruptcy. He had made some legal blunder which might lead, very soon, to his being struck off the rolls.

That was Shadcombe and its talk during that autumn. In November an incident occurred which, for the time, turned the residents' attention into a fresh channel.

Jeffries, the Chief Constable, was arrested.

The incident came upon the town like a bomb bursting. Jeffries was one of its most respected citizens. His character, from the time he had joined the force a number of years before, had been excellent. His integrity was believed to be beyond question. When the news reached them, the residents felt that their faith in human nature had received a severe shock.

He had been arrested at a village near London. That was one point which caused surprise and gave rise to speculation. What had he been doing in that village of all places? Then "it transpired," as the local paper put it, that he had gone to London, two days before, for a brief holiday and to see relatives. Interest was increased when it became known that the arrest had been made in a house "occupied by a well-known American gentleman, Mr. Charles P. Jamieson, of Kansas City, Missouri."

"Why, that must be the house where Mrs. Jamieson lives who was staying here," everybody who had met her exclaimed. "How very curious! What can Jeffries have gone to that house for? What can it all mean?"

The solution was very simple, and it appeared in next day's papers. The Chief Constable, in plain clothes, being off duty, had called at the house about seven o'clock on the evening of November 30th. It

was then dark. He had asked to see Mrs. Jamieson, and had sent in his name. Mrs. Jamieson had come out into the hall at once, and she had recognised him, for while in Shadcombe she had interviewed him with reference to a purse which she had lost at Babbacombe, and which he subsequently recovered for her. The Constable had asked if he might see her "in private," and he had looked "so solemn and important," she said, that, believing he had come to see her on some serious matter, she had taken him into her boudoir, and shut the door.

Almost at once he had demanded money, quite a large sum. Taken aback and a little frightened, Mrs. Jamieson had, nevertheless, not lost her presence of mind. She had first asked him several questions to gain time, and then she had endeavoured to put him off by saying that she had not that amount in the house, and so forth.

The servants' quarters being at the back of the house, and there being nobody in the place then but the servants and herself, she realised that everything now depended upon her remaining calm and not losing her wits. Had she attempted to ring, the man would, she felt instinctively, have prevented her, and the servants would not have heard her had she called out.

Meanwhile—all this she had afterwards told to the newspaper reporters—the man was becoming more and more importunate, and his manner was growing threatening. What was she to do? She had the money there, locked up in a drawer, and could have given it to him at once, but she saw no reason for doing so. What the man would do next, she guessed in advance. In a minute he would either attack and try to overcome her, or he would threaten blackmail of some sort

or other. She was almost at the end of her expedients to outwit him, when she heard the front-door slam. Jeffries heard it too, and he sprang towards her.

"Who is that?" she said he exclaimed hoarsely; and she answered quietly, "My husband."

The man, she went on, at once looked wildly about the room, like some hunted animal. But the room had one door only, and before her unwelcome visitor could decide what to do, her husband entered.

"My husband is a tall man," she said, "over six feet four, and immensely strong. I told him to lock the door and take out the key, which he did. Then in a few words I explained what had happened.

"By this time the Constable was cowering at the far side of the room, and livid with fear. He began to mutter apologies, begging to be let off. But my husband is not a man to stand nonsense. At first I feared that he might forget himself in his anger and do the man some bodily harm, but he exercised wonderful self-control. He stalked across the room, seized the Constable by the nape of the neck and gave him a tremendous shaking, just as you might shake a dog. Then, still holding him in his strong, right-hand grip, he walked over with him to the telephone, took off the receiver with his left hand, and summoned the police. They arrived about fifteen minutes after, during the whole of which time my husband kept his grip on the back of the man's neck, so that the fellow couldn't move. Then he handed the man over, and that is all. It was one of the most unpleasant incidents I have ever experienced," she ended with a smile.

That was what the Shadcombe people read in the papers, and it set the whole place talking. During the afternoon Irene Baxter went to see the boatman

who had talked so freely in the boat on their way back from the Oarstone. She found him already holding forth in broad Devonshire to a group of round-eyed listeners. Yes, he had said all along that that Constable was "a bad veller as didn't orter be at large." He had said so over and over again, he kept on repeating. And there "was others too what knawed all 'bout un." Among them he named several times the individual said to be responsible for bringing the man from Iceland and afterwards recommending him, when Jeffries had applied to join the police force.

And then, as often happens, sensation succeeded sensation.

People were still talking about Jeffries, and hazarding conjectures, when a fresh excitement occurred to stimulate their senses.

Wal Marner had been to supervise alterations being made in his new house. He left when it grew dark, and set out to walk back to Shadcombe, as he sometimes did when alone. Half-way across the bridge over the river, he noticed a man with a Trilby hat pulled down over his eyes, standing near the oil-lamp, leaning against the rails. Thinking the man must be ill, he walked across and spoke to him. At once the man looked up, straightened himself, and Marner saw a revolver muzzle within a yard of his chest. Almost at the same instant he recognised Milo!

"Waal," he said with an exaggerated drawl, "what's the game, my lad?"

"Game?" Milo exclaimed savagely. "It's no 'game,' I can tell you. You've robbed and ruined me, and I have waited here an hour for you. I am going to kill you, shoot you like a dog, and I want you to know it!"

Marner gave a great laugh. He had not spent his

life in the wilds of Western America and among the toughs of the Bowery, and of Chinatown, and faced many a perilous situation, for nothing. Even in that moment of crisis, as it might have seemed to a man of less iron nerve, the idea of his being “shot like a dog” in one of the most peaceful little towns in England, appealed to his sense of humour.

The muzzle of the pistol still shone in the dim light. An instant later he had decided what to do.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON KINGSTON BRIDGE

MILY had selected the middle of Kingston Bridge for his attempt on Marner's life, having duly taken into consideration two facts. The first was that he would be able, directly he had done the deed, to throw his revolver into the river, and thus rid himself of one incriminating proof of guilt; the second that he would be able at once to walk on to Kingston, where he could return to Shadcombe by the ferry boat. He had made all arrangements for proving an alibi, should any untoward incident occur to upset his well-laid plans. But he did not foresee that anything could upset them. He meant, if he had time and nobody was in sight, to lift his victim's body over the iron rail of the bridge, and drop it into the flowing tide. It would make one more mysterious crime, he reflected, which first would prove a nine days' wonder, then be described as a murder committed "by some person or persons unknown," and then gradually be forgotten. He had learnt a lesson from the attempt some months before upon Marner's life, and seen how easily that would-be assassin had escaped, though that attempt had been made in broad daylight and with a second man, the chauffeur, to reckon with. In the darkness it should be still easier, he had reflected, to escape without arousing suspicion. Besides, Marner having already been

once shot at, every one would naturally infer that this second and successful attempt upon his life had been made by the same man.

But, as so often happens in cases of this nature, though he had laid his plans so carefully, he had overlooked one thing. That "thing" was the "human element." So sure was he of success, so certain that he would shoot this man against whom he sought vengeance, shoot him "like a dog," that it never occurred to him to take into consideration the possibility of his victim's escaping by means of a simple ruse.

Marner was practically face to face with death, when he came to quick decision. His sharp ear had caught the sound of a horse trotting leisurely towards the bridge. By the sound, he judged it must be just reaching the bridge, at the Kingston end. Quick as thought he suddenly clapped both hands upon his heart, and stumbled forward, not towards Milo, rather away from him, to one side. A moment later he was leaning for support against the iron rail, his back to his assailant. His head had dropped forward, his hat had fallen off. For some moments he seemed to be trying with one hand to clutch the rail, while the other he still kept pressed upon his left side. And then, all at once, he collapsed in a heap upon the pavement, groaning.

The horse was coming nearer. Milo heard it now, and hesitated. For the instant he was nonplussed. Here was this man he had meant to kill, lying in the road, and to all appearance dying. If he were not dying, he must at least have had a fit. His first instinct was to walk away, going towards Shadcombe. Then he realised that the rider must quickly overtake him, and that it might look strange if he, passing by

the oil-lamp not a minute before, had left unaided a man clearly very ill.

There was but one thing he could do. He must pretend to be succouring the man lying in the road. Slipping his pistol into his pocket, he at once knelt down, loosened Marner's collar and shirt, and laid his hand upon his forehead.

A few moments later the rider came alongside. He reined up.

"Hullo? What's amiss?" he called out.

Instantly Milo recognised the voice. It was Tolhurst's.

"That you, Bobbie?" he called back. "Here's poor Marner had a fit, or something. I came up just in time. Found him lying here, panting like anything. I really think he is dying."

Then another thought occurred to him.

"You had better gallop into Shadcombe and get a doctor, quick. He seems at the last gasp."

"I will," Tolhurst answered. "But I will have a look at him first."

Before Milo could say more, Tolhurst had dismounted. He tied the reins to the rail, then came over to where Marner lay.

The oil-lamp shed a fitful ray upon the outstretched form. Marner's eyes were closed, and he was breathing heavily. Tolhurst felt his pulse, then placed the back of his hand upon his forehead. Then he gently drew up an eyelid.

"Strange," he said, "his pulse is quite normal. And he doesn't feel hot. How long have you been here?"

"Oh, only a few minutes."

"And you found him lying here?"

"I have just said so."

Then, to their surprise, Marner suddenly stood up. The light from the oil-lamp showed that he was smiling. He bent down, picked up his hat, and, with his pocket-handkerchief, began flicking the dust off it.

"I congratulate our young friend," he said, addressing Tolhurst as he put on his hat again, "upon his remarkable imagination and his rapidity of invention. What really happened is this, Tolhurst. I was walking along, when I noticed a man leaning against the rail, with his hat pulled down over his eyes so that I couldn't recognise him. As I came up he whipped out a revolver, covered me with it, and said he was going to shoot me. Just then I heard some one coming along on horseback, so to 'spar for time,' as the prize-fighters say, I tumbled down into the road and pretended I was ill. If you put your hand into his right-hand jacket pocket, you will find the revolver. Now, what had we better do with him? Pitch him into the river?"

Tolhurst looked from one to the other. It was obvious to him that Marner spoke the truth.

"Give me that revolver," he said sharply to Milo.

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"*Give it to me.*" Tolhurst's voice was threatening.

Milo hesitated. Then he suddenly produced it, and handed it over.

"And now come along with us."

Instead of doing so, Milo cursed them with an oath, turned, and began to walk quickly away towards Kingston.

"Are you letting him go?" Tolhurst asked quickly.

"Oh! he can go now, for all I care," was the other's answer.

Milo had arranged for an alibi, and would be able, he knew, to snap his fingers at them should they report to the police what had happened. They might make statements, but every statement they would make he would be able to disprove. He congratulated himself upon his foresight in making arrangements whereby he would be able to prove that he had been elsewhere at the time the crime was committed should suspicion chance to rest upon him, which he had not for an instant deemed possible.

Still, though safe for the present, he knew that henceforth both Marner and Tolhurst would look upon him with grave suspicion. What a fool he had been to be duped, and how unfortunate that Tolhurst, of all people, should have come up just then. But no matter. He would yet find a way of avenging himself on Marner.

Then he reflected that in a very few days the fact of his having misappropriated his clients' moneys, and of his being a ruined man, must become public property, and that in all probability he would himself be arrested. It would then be too late for him to get back on the man he hated.

He was passing a little inn, in Kingston. The windows of the bar were brilliantly lit up, and he could hear men talking and laughing within. To drown his thoughts he went in, and ordered something to drink.

He stayed there drinking until the bar closed. Then he was pushed out into the street, unconscious of his surroundings.

Since the day hounds had met at Round O, Tolhurst had been turning over in his mind the incident in the

fog. He was no fool, and he rather plumed himself on minding other people's business.

"Other people's business is usually so much more interesting than one's own," he had remarked one afternoon in the club, when the old retired Colonel had hinted to him, that there was such a thing as "minding one's own business."

And so it came about that, without saying so to anybody, he had been quietly at work finding out what Grey and his friends were "up to."

So far he was satisfied with what he had found out. He had discovered that the three were in the habit of visiting the cave, sometimes together, sometimes alone. He had discovered that Irene had been trying to extract from various people information to do with Milo, with Marner, and with Mrs. Ashcombe and Polly. Also she had asked numerous questions of the tradespeople about Jeffries, the Chief Constable, even before that officer's imprudent visit to Mrs. Jamieson. He had discovered the cave, of course, and noted what was in it, and paid particular attention to the bootprints he had heard Irene Baxter and Gerald Grey talking about in the fog. He had put two and two together, and decided that they must be on somebody's track. But whose track? What he had seen and heard, seemed to have little bearing upon the Holcombe Mystery, which was now to all intents forgotten.

Could it be Milo in whom they were interested? It seemed hardly likely. Besides, what connection could Milo have with Marner or with Jeffries, and what was there in that cave on Haldon that could concern Milo? It all pointed to something definite, however, and what that definite something was he was determined to find out.

And then, on the top of it all, came this incident on Kingston Bridge. He did not for a moment doubt that Milo had meant to kill Marner that night, but why had he wanted to kill him? He had heard the rumours of Milo's approaching *débâcle*, but until now had not heeded them. Could it be that Marner was in some way or other the cause of that *débâcle*, and was that why Milo had meant to shoot Marner?

Yes, that, he decided, must be the reason. If it should presently be proved that Milo really had robbed his clients and come to hopeless grief himself, then Tolhurst felt his conclusion would be the correct one.

What good end would be served by reporting what had happened on the bridge? The police would have only the word of each of the three to go upon, for there would be no evidence to produce to substantiate their statements except the pistol, and the production of the pistol would really prove nothing. Milo could, and probably would, disclaim its ownership and repudiate their whole story. Why should not the police take his word as well as that of the other two. And supposing they did not, what then? Why, he and Marner would merely lay themselves open to ridicule, even to abuse. More, Milo might bring an action against them for defamation of character, and, being a lawyer, he would very likely win it, even in face of the fact of his having lost his reputation.

"Better leave it alone," was Marner's final comment the day after the incident, when Tolhurst consulted him. "If he tries it again, or anything of the kind, I guess I'll be prepared for him next time."

Three days after the bridge incident Marner crossed over to Ireland again. Upon his landing at North Wall he was met on the quay by a man he had not

seen since the day he had been shot at, but whom he expected to find awaiting him: the old Newfoundlander named Watkins, with whom he had conversed at the Newton Abbot inn that day.

After despatching his valise to the Shelbourne, Marner told Watkins to come across with him to a certain railway hotel. The smoking-room was deserted at that hour, but he rang the bell and ordered refreshments.

When they were again alone, with the door shut, he pushed his hand into his inside breast-pocket and pulled out a bulging note-case. He opened it, and with a wetted finger carefully flipped up the corners of a number of bank notes.

"There is your blood money," he said, as he thrust them into the other man's hand. "It is not the first of our dealings together, but I guess it will be the last."

Watkins chuckled.

"Until the next," he answered laconically, tucking the roll of notes into his trousers pocket. "Is there any other service I can render you, Wal?"

"Yep. Get back to England by the next boat."

"That was my intention. You'll admit I did the job for you cleverly, anyway."

"Oh, cleverly enough," Marner said dryly.

"There's one or two more you want put away."

"They'll put themselves away. I shall not need your help."

The old man gave a callous grin. When he had emptied his tumbler he said abruptly:

"Suppose there was some one wanted you put away?"

Marner looked at him sharply.

"Say what you mean," he said in a tone of command.

"I only said 'supposing,'" and Watkins leered at him.

"Say what you mean," Marner repeated, threateningly, "or without hesitation I'll strangle you as you have strangled others."

The old man looked cowed.

"What about that lawyer fellow who meant to shoot you on the bridge?"

Marner's gaze seemed to pierce him as he asked:

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody told me. I saw what happened. I was anchored in the river, fishing."

"Ho! So you would put me out if you were paid, eh?"

"We've all got to live. Listen, I would sooner work for you. Why not be rid of the lawyer, as he's threatening you? Same terms as the last."

Marner looked the scoundrel full in the eyes for some moments. Then he laughed in an odd way.

"Say, of all the scuts I've met," he presently observed, "and I've met some, you knock spots off the worst. I wonder how you were got?"

"I've wondered that myself, at times. But come to business, Wal. Is it a square deal?"

"No, and never will be."

"I've done the job here I came over to do for you, and it's all right. You can trust me."

"The length of my toe. The job over here was a different sort of thing."

"Don't make no odds to me, so long as I get paid. You do pay, I'll say that for you, and well," and he slapped his trouser pocket.

Marner rose abruptly.

"Get out, you scut!" he exclaimed. "I sometimes wish I'd never met you."

"Remember whom you last said that to?" Watkins asked, looking up at him without stirring. "Who was it shot at you, day of that regatta, but didn't get you square? I was there when he said it to you, out in New Orleans, four years ago. He's another you'd be wise to be rid of, Wal, and at once."

"I'll be rid of you, if you don't watch it," Marner answered, his patience almost at an end.

Then, taking up his hat and stick, he strode out of the room, went out on to the quay, and hailed a jaunting car.

As on a previous occasion, upon his arrival at the Shelbourne he asked if there were letters for him, and was given a handful.

"I have the best of luck—in some ways," he said when he had read them. Then he smiled.

"I wonder what Grey and that little detective would give to get possession of this," he said aloud, as he finished reading one of the letters for the second time.

Then he tore it into little bits and put them on the fire blazing in the grate.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PURSUIT OF THE TRUTH

JEFFRIES, awaiting his trial, speculated upon the future.

He realised, now it was too late, the folly of his last act. Yet what else could he have done—bled, as he had been, until life seemed to him hardly worth living any longer.

And the irony of it was that he was to be tried for attempting to extort money with threats, while the reptile who had bled him by means of threats, in other words by blackmail, went scot-free.

If only he dared expose him! But he did not dare. To expose him would be to sign his own death warrant.

He meant to plead guilty. It would be useless to do aught else. And what would his sentence be?

He turned pale as the thought occurred to him. For he must, he knew, be sentenced to imprisonment.

But supposing he offered to turn King's Evidence? What then? Would he, by doing so, be likely to mitigate the sentence about to be passed upon him? If so

He must find that out for certain.

His thoughts drifted back over his past life. The friend he had made in Iceland, with whom he had returned to England, who had recommended and to all intends gone bail for him when he had decided to join the police, what would he think of him now? And

would he be called as a witness at the trial, and be cross-examined as to his previous acquaintanceship with him?

As this thought occurred to him, Jeffries felt a pang of true remorse for his act. That, indeed, would be the bitterest cup of all. His friend had done so much for him, had put himself out to help him to get on, and in return he might find himself looked upon as being tarred with the same brush.

Again Jeffries cursed himself for his stupidity. He must indeed have been a fool, he reflected, not to foresee what the outcome of his attitude towards Mrs. Jamieson that night must be. Even if her husband had not happened to return home at the psychological moment, as he had done, Nemesis must eventually have overtaken him. Mrs. Jamieson had recognised him at once, as he had known she must do, so of course, even had she paid him the sum he had demanded, she would afterwards have lodged information with the police. Oh, he must indeed have been mad when he went to her that night!

“A lady has come to visit you.”

The warder’s words startled him out of his reverie. A few minutes later the visitor was admitted, the warder remaining within earshot.

For once, Yvonne was quietly dressed. As she entered the cell, Jeffries instinctively rose. He seemed covered with confusion.

“Sit down,” she said. “A friend of mine, you will probably guess who, has asked me to come to see you, as he is at present in Ireland and so can’t come himself. He wants me to ask you a few questions, and to make a proposal which he thinks you would be well advised to adopt.”

Jeffries, glancing about him in a self-conscious way, did not answer.

"As you know," she went on, after a pause, "he knows a great deal about you. Now, he says he feels confident it was because you were driven into a corner of some sort that you—that you did what you did. Is that so?"

"Yes, that is quite true."

"To put it bluntly, you were blackmailed. You didn't know which way to turn for money, and so—so you—you tried to get it that way. Is our friend right?"

"Yes."

"Won't you tell me now who blackmailed you? Remember, our mutual acquaintance is practically certain he knows."

Jeffries looked at her sharply. Then he answered:

"I cannot tell you."

"You mean you will not. That is a pity. If you would actually say his name it would simplify matters, and benefit you, too. Are you sure you won't tell me?"

"I cannot tell you."

She shrugged her shoulders, and was silent for some moments.

"Soon after Miss Ella Ashcombe's death, last February," she went on suddenly, "a bundle tied up with string was found near Hole Head, and, as it was believed it might have some bearing upon the crime, was handed to the police by the finder. It was then given to you for safe keeping until it should be wanted and—you lost it. At any rate, it disappeared, and you explained how you had 'lost' it, and, to save your get-

ting into trouble, the ‘loss’ was hushed-up. Isn’t that so?”

Jeffries looked surprised as he nodded.

“There were letters in that bundle written by, or apparently by, Mr. Gerald Grey to Miss Ashcombe—letters which, upon the face of them, might have led to suspicion of the crime being made to rest upon Mr. Grey, which did, in fact, do so, for it was chiefly upon the strength of statements in those letters that Mr. Grey was subsequently arrested. And no sooner had he been arrested than you ‘lost’ the letters, so that this evidence could not be produced in court. Now, why was that?”

Jeffries remained silent.

“Our mutual friend knows why it was, and he has told me. It was because you were ordered, under threat of certain disclosures about yourself if you refused to do so, to ‘lose’ them.”

Jeffries began to fidget again, as he had already done once or twice.

Suddenly Yvonne said quickly:

“You know who committed the crime—who killed Miss Ashcombe!”

“I know nothing at all about it!” he exclaimed with emphasis. “Nothing at all.”

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

“That is a foolish attitude to adopt,” she said. She glanced significantly in the direction of the warder, and added, “Of course, I know why you deny it.”

“How do you come to know so much about me?” Jeffries suddenly asked.

“I am surprised at the question,” she answered, “seeing what our mutual friend knows about you.”

“And I about him,” Jeffries answered quickly. “But

I bear him no ill-will. I have no reason to. Years ago he did me more than one good turn. You said he had a proposal to make to me, I think."

"Yes, he suggests that you should turn King's Evidence, relative to your blackmailing, to Miss Ashcombe's death and to other matters you know about. That, he says, would probably have the effect of exonerating you to some extent at your trial."

Jeffries looked up quickly.

"I have thought of that myself," he said. "But would it have that effect? If I knew for certain——"

"You need have no doubt on that score. Our mutual friend told me to emphasise that. He would himself have come to see you had it been possible; if he waited until his return from Ireland to come, however, it might be too late. Naturally he has a reason of his own, too, for wanting you to turn King's Evidence."

Jeffries seemed all at once quite excited.

"I must take time to think this over," he said. "Will you tell him that, please?"

"And meanwhile you will tell me where the bundle is? It is important that we should know."

He hesitated. Then, taking a pencil and a scrap of paper from his pocket, he scribbled a few words.

"You will find it there," he said, handing her the scrap.

Yvonne raised her eyebrows as she read what he had written.

"You surprise me," she exclaimed. "I have been there several times. Are you sure that it is there?"

"You have been there?"

He stared at her in astonishment. Suddenly he said:

"The last time I saw you, that day on Haldon, in the thick fog, when I was in Mrs. Ashcombe's car,

and you and Mr. Grey and Miss Baxter got in to go back to Shadcombe—had you by any chance been there that day?"

"We had come straight from there when we asked Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur to take us back to Shadcombe."

"Ah."

Somehow he seemed relieved.

Meanwhile Marner was busy in Ireland. It may be well to say now what really took him there so often. Among the men and women of doubtful repute with whom he had associated during his life in America, he had met and become intimate with members of a group who called themselves "Irish Patriots," whose headquarters was in Ireland. At least that was how they put it. In reality they had no established headquarters. Such a thing would have been risky. Their leaders lived in Ireland, but in no particular part. They were to be found distributed over practically the whole of the country. It was a kind of secret society, with rules, and a code which enabled any member to recognise any other member, man or woman, no matter in what part of the world they might chance to meet.

Like most Irishmen, love of his country was bred in Marner's bone. He knew nothing definite about its government, or whether it was or was not mismanaged, but he had quickly found out, whilst associating with the members of the "Irish Patriots" in America, that there was money to be made by throwing in his lot with theirs, and so without delay he had thrown his lot in.

Upon his return to England from America he had, as we know, decided to abandon for all time his past

way of living, and to begin life afresh, blotting out, so far as he could, all recollection of the past thirty years. But, as old habits are difficult to eradicate completely, so one habit of the past remained. And Marner, having persuaded himself into actually believing that in allowing that one habit to remain, he was really benefiting his country and acting patriotically, made no attempt to uproot it.

Briefly, then, he was now engaged in Ireland in helping the "Irish Patriots" secretly to import contraband into their country. It was not that he cared greatly whether he did or did not benefit pecuniarily now. It was the secrecy, the organising, the general excitement of the traffic which appealed to him, combined with his mistaken belief that in furthering these illegal aims he was acting in a rather heroic manner. That, in reality, strong man though he was, he was being employed as a tool or catspaw by certain leaders of the band of Irish Patriots, never entered his head. Nor did it occur to him to wonder whether any of his former associates in his adventurous days were now aware that he was engaged in Ireland's contraband traffic, and engaged in it on a very large scale.

Yvonne certainly never suspected it. Had anybody told her the truth, she would have refused to believe it without proofs shown.

There was one man, however, who did know about it, and that man was his bitter enemy, Octavius Milo. Curious to relate, it was Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur, Tom, who had, quite unwittingly, first aroused his suspicions. Tom had met him in Starcross, one day, where Milo had hoped to catch a train to Exeter; but this train had not stopped at Starcross, and Tom, driv-

ing Mrs. Ashcombe's car, happening to come along at the critical moment, had offered to give him a lift into Exeter, of which offer Milo had gladly availed himself.

As they drove along, Milo had entered into conversation with Tom, and presently, happening to speak of Wal Marner, Tom had said:

"A nice gentleman, but a pity he helps them Irish to get arms into their country, don't you think so, sir? It can't do no good to nobody."

"Help the Irish to gets arms into—what are you talking about, Tom?"

"I thought most people knew that, sir," Tom had answered with a grin. "No business of mine, of course. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken about it."

"Who told you about it?" Milo asked, his interest suddenly stirred.

"Well, it was old Joe Soper I first heard speak of it. Curious his death, wasn't it, sir? It was at an inn in Holcombe one night—he was talking free about it, very free indeed. He'd had a glass or two. Seemed he'd just heard of Mr. Marner's being in Shadcombe, and thinking of taking a house there. He talked a lot, oh, a lot that night about Mr. Marner. But, as I say, he'd had a glass or two, so we didn't heed much what he said. But I heard about it since; about the arms, I mean. They were speaking of it only last week in a public-house, at the end of Market Street. You don't know the place, I expect. There was a lot of Irish sailors landed off a boat that night. They were talking free, too. Oh, very free."

For some minutes Milo did not speak. The car was speeding up the hill to Peamore Arch. Suddenly he said:

"Tom, look here. What you have told me about Mr. Marner greatly interests me. Can you find out more, do you think, and get actual statements of facts and tell me whom you get them from? I will make it worth your while," and he glanced at him significantly.

"I dare say I can, sir. Only, of course, I don't want to get into any trouble."

"You won't. I promise you that. But mind, not a word to any one. This is quite a private affair between you and me."

"All right, sir. I understand."

This conversation had taken place just after Milo's disastrous attempt to recoup himself by backing horses. Within a week Tom had confided to him a considerable amount of information, apparently trustworthy, concerning Marner's visits to Ireland and his "business" there.

It was on the day Yvonne went to see Jeffries, that Milo decided that he now had sufficient evidence to hang Marner. He chuckled quietly as he glanced through the notes he had compiled, based upon information obtained. And he had not only notes. He had documentary evidence signed by a renegade Irishman who would almost have cut a man's throat for a sovereign. Oh yes, he had his enemy in his grip at last. In a very few days, now, he would have a loop round his neck, and his vengeance would be satisfied. Marner had escaped him once, now his vengeance would be even greater, for this man, who was gradually becoming the most popular and most sought-after resident in the neighbourhood, would unexpectedly be arrested, and soon publicly disgraced—if nothing worse.

He sat in his chair, alone in his office, thinking deeply. Then all at once a new idea came to him.

Marner was in Ireland now. He had gone there quite recently. Without a doubt, it was in relation to this contraband traffic that he had gone there. He, Milo, would have no difficulty in finding out what part of Ireland he was in, and where he was staying. Why should he not run over to Ireland too, and try to find out even more about Marner's movements? In a case of this kind it was impossible to collect too much evidence, and if he could say that he himself, while in Ireland. . . .

Yes, he would go at once, the very next day.

CHAPTER XXIX

IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

BOBBIE TOLHURST was in a breezy mood. He was one of those public-school products who take life as it comes and consider it as a joke. He had "lived" as most young men of the world "live," but he had never indulged in the questionable occupation known as "sowing wild oats." There are still people so fatuous as to believe that a young man can go through a period of wild-oat sowing and then emerge from it unscathed, indeed be the better for it, and from that time onward live a beautiful life. Tolhurst did not hold that opinion. He had seen enough of life and of oat-sowers to know that the young man who deliberately sets out to sow wild oats almost invariably goes on sowing them during the remainder of his existence. He was rather strong on that point.

"Do you really suppose," he said once to an acquaintance who spoke approvingly of a young man's "sowing his wild oats," "that any habit contracted reaches the limit of its tether and then dies naturally? Have you ever known an habitual drunkard, or an habitual drug-taker, or an habitual anything else, suddenly stop dead and never drink or take drugs or indulge again in a practice that has become a second nature to him? Then how can you suppose that the habit of dissipation and debauchery, once acquired, can be suddenly abandoned

at will, or that it ever is, except perhaps in very rare cases where the individual has an extraordinarily strong will and quite exceptional self-control?"

He was certainly no saint himself, but he had always had enough intelligence to be able to realise what would happen if ever he were metaphorically to let himself go, as he had seen so many do. He used to say that he loved trying new sensations, no matter of what kind, but that he never repeated the experiment if he found any particular sensation unpleasant, or likely to lead to disastrous results if often indulged in.

On this afternoon he was feeling what he himself would call "very bucked." As he sat with Irene Baxter and Gerald Grey in his cosy sitting-room, where they had all been having tea, he suddenly inconsequently said, after lighting a cigarette:

"Miss Baxter, don't you think the landscape views that one gets on Haldon exceptionally picturesque?"

"Indeed I do," she answered, surprised at the unexpected remark. "But what made you think of that now?"

"This fog did," he replied with a wave of the arm in the direction of the window. Though it was nearly dark, the drifting sea mist could be easily distinguished.

"I don't think I follow you," Irene said, puzzled. She turned to Grey.

"What is he driving at, Gerald?" she asked, smiling. "His mental gymnastics are beyond my comprehension."

"Because," Tolhurst went on with an odd look before Grey could answer. "I once met you in a fog on Haldon, that day hounds met at Round O. You remember, surely?"

"Now you speak of it, I do. Still . . . ?"

"Still what?"

"You mystify me. I don't follow your train of thought."

"I had a notion, somehow," he continued, flicking the ash of his cigarette into the grate, "that on that afternoon you and Gerald and Miss Yvonne lost yourselves in the fog on Haldon, that you wandered on and on, and that somehow in the fog you stumbled unexpectedly—of course quite unexpectedly—across a cave in the side of a hill sloping down towards Dawlish and almost hidden by heather. All this may be the result of diseased imagination on my part or of some strange mental aberration, as you say, still"

As he stopped speaking, Tolhurst felt Irene's eyes, as he afterwards said, "boring into him."

After some moments she said quietly: "Well?"

"Well, I was going to ask, why did neither you, nor Gerald, nor Miss Yvonne, ever speak to anyone about that cave?"

"See here, Bobbie," Grey cut in, "let us have this out. When did——"

"Have it out, just what I mean to do, old friend," Tolhurst interrupted. "Now, 'as we are all friends,' as the card-sharpers say, let us all put out cards down. I believed then, I know now, that the three of you were trying to discover certain clues—I needn't particularise. Since that day when I overheard your conversation—my overhearing it was accidental, I assure you—I have also been trying to discover clues, more or less the same clues, I fancy, and not without success. Don't you think, then, it will be as well if we all confide in one another, so that each may know how far the other has gone?"

"I agree to that," Irene answered at once. "In fact,

I suggested some time ago our taking you into our confidence, Bobbie. Didn't I Gerald?"

"Very well, then," Tolhurst said. "We are all trying, I take it, to discover who caused Ella Ashcombe's death. Isn't it your opinion—it is mine—that several mutual acquaintances of ours are in possession of facts relating to that tragedy?"

"That we know for certain," Grey answered.

"Good. Now, as we are alone we can mention names. The names I submit are Octavius Milo, Mrs. Ashcombe, Polly Ashcombe, Wal Marner, I think Chief Constable Jeffries, and finally Tom, Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur."

"Not Tom, and not Polly Ashcombe," Irene said with emphasis. "They know nothing at all about it."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Very well, rule them out; I have not included Miss Yvonne, because, of course, I know that she is in your confidence."

"You have omitted to name the cook who left Mrs. Ashcombe's service the day before the crime was committed," Irene put in.

"Because I don't know her name. Also I never thought of her. Do you think that Mrs. Ashcombe's maid, Charlotte, knows anything?"

"We are almost sure she doesn't," Grey replied. "To all intents we have proofs. Have you yourself discovered anything in the nature of circumstantial or direct evidence, and so forth?"

"I believe I have. My theory, though I am open to correction, is that some sort of gang had to do with the murder, possibly that the gang instigated it."

Irene looked at Grey.

"The very conclusion we came to last week," she said.

"Good. Gerald, give me a cigarette. I haven't one left."

When he had lit it, he went on:

"I have ferreted about a good deal since that day I heard you talking in the fog; yes, it was mean of me not to reveal my presence, but what you were saying took me so by surprise. Now, Marner and Jeffries, and that old man who was strangled, Joe Soper, and Mrs. Ashcombe's mysterious husband, also a certain individual she knew intimately and who died in a village called Kenton, near Exeter, on the night of the crime—you know Kenton, Gerald—and a disreputable old Newfoundland sealer named Watkins, were all as thick as thieves years back in various parts of the world. There was a tramp trading ship that ran a lot of contraband cargoes in various seas, fifteen or twenty years ago. Its owner was a man named W. Marner. Now, from what I have gathered, it is long odds that W. Marner was none other than Wal Marner. I got a lot of my information from the old sealer, who now lives in Newton Abbot; I have him a five-pound-note the second time I met him, and he was all over me at once."

"Was Milo one of the gang?" Irene asked suddenly.

"Oh, no. He would have been too young. Milo, so far as I can make out, became acquainted with Marner much later, about the time I myself first met Marner. It was in America we both first met him. By that time Marner had come up in the world. He was then dealing chiefly in stocks and shares. I'll say this for him: he never once hinted to me that I should weigh out on any of his shady speculations—barefaced ramps I should have called them."

"But come to the point," Irene said impatiently.

"Whom do you think committed the Gareth Cottage crime?"

Tolhurst blew a cloud of smoke towards the mantelpiece. Then he said slowly:

"Don't you think Mrs. Ashcombe's husband may have done it?"

Grey and Irene Baxter expostulated together.

"My dear Bobbie," Grey said, laughing, "all that you have told us may be right enough, or it may not, but when you say you think George Ashcombe Oh, no, you are barking up the wrong tree this time. Why, George Ashcombe has been dead years."

"Yes," Irene added; "he died in a lunatic asylum on that island off the Californian coast where all lunatics are confined. I forget the name for the moment."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive."

"Have you proofs?"

"Well, no, not actual proofs. What proofs could we have?"

"Then how comes it that the old sealer, Watkins, declares that George Ashcombe died less than three months ago? Mind, I don't take as gospel all that old man tells me, but my private conviction is that Ashcombe is still alive."

"I am sure you are mistaken," Irene said. "I too thought once that he was still alive. Mrs. Ashcombe herself thought so, and may think so still. That I know from what she said to a clairvoyante named Satanella she went to see in London. Satanella was one of my own detectives, disguised as a fortune-teller. Besides, what possible reason could Ella's father have had for murdering his own daughter?"

"Suppose she were not his daughter?" suggested Tolhurst.

"She was his daughter. But Polly—this is in strict confidence, of course—is not his daughter. That, too, my woman, Satanella, found out during her conversation with Mrs. Ashcombe."

"Then again," Tolhurst pursued, "look at the strange things that have happened. Why was Mrs. Ashcombe always so nervy, why is she still, if anything is said about prisons?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"I have reason to believe that her husband was at one time in prison."

"Did the old sealer say so?" put in Irene.

"Yes. And how came Gareth Cottage to catch fire? My conviction is that Mrs. Ashcombe herself fired it in order to hide traces of her husband which existed, or which she believed existed, and might eventually serve as clues that would lead to his arrest, provided he could be found. I believe that all this time Mrs. Ashcombe is shielding her husband. I haven't yet discovered where the Ashcombes lived before they came here, have you?"

"No. But I have suspicions."

"So have I, strong suspicions. Polly Ashcombe told me at Mrs. Monckton's picnic that she used to hunt in Yorkshire."

"I remember her telling you that."

"Then you may also remember her mother's cutting in and preventing her saying more, by turning the conversation. Besides drawing out old Watkins, I have talked to odds and ends of old sailor men and others at a certain haunt in Market Street. I have picked up fragments from there."

For a little while they all remained silent. Then Irene Baxter said:

"If what you think is true, I mean that Mrs. Ashcombe herself fired the cottage, it certainly would account for one or two little happenings which have hitherto mystified me."

"Such as?"

"Well, one night, for instance, Polly found Mrs. Ashcombe alone in the room where her daughter was murdered, kneeling on all fours, and rubbing away at the floor. Mrs. Ashcombe told Polly she was 'polishing' it; a most unlikely thing. The sound she was making—all this I have since heard indirectly—was like the sound a small saw makes. Could she, do you think, have been trying to obliterate marks on the floor, say the impression of bootnails, by rubbing it with sand-paper? That is just the sound sand-paper rubbed on wood would make. If your theory is correct, Bobbie—mind, I still doubt its accuracy—she might have been trying to obliterate boot impressions which she believed to have been made on the floor by her husband on the night of the crime."

Tolhurst's face became animated.

"Indeed, Irene," he exclaimed, "what you say throws fresh light. Yes, depend upon it that is what she was doing."

Wal Marner, smoking a long cheroot, stuck in the corner of his mouth, stood watching a Holyhead steamer coming slowly into Kingstown.

He had friends aboard, and he had come to meet them. They were all, had the police but known, members of the "Irish Patriots" League, and the business they were coming over to attend to was not business

of a kind that the British Government would have looked upon with approval.

For ten minutes or so Marner had been chatting affably—he usually chatted with strangers when he wanted to kill time—with a couple of tall, well-built, “official” looking men, whom he at once set down as detectives. Once he wondered whether by chance they could be waiting to arrest any of his friends upon landing. He quickly decided, however, that this could not be possible. He and his confederates in the contraband traffic managed their affairs far too artfully ever to be caught napping by mere constables.

The boat came slowly alongside, and soon the passengers were descending the gangway. Marner noticed that the two men he had been talking to now stood one on each side of the narrow gangway, and that they cast a quick glance of scrutiny at every passenger landing.

Again he wondered if by any possibility they could be waiting to arrest his friends.

Ah, there were his friends, all three together. They walked down the plank in single file, each carrying some hand-baggage. The two detectives looked hard at them, then looked away again.

All was well.

“Wait here a moment,” he said, when he had exchanged greetings with them. “I think something is going to happen. Hullo! Why here comes Octavius Milo!”

As he spoke, Milo came down the gangway. He had hardly set foot ashore, when the detectives stepped up to him together.

What they said, Marner could not hear, but he saw

Milo turned rather pale. And at that moment Milo saw him.

At once his face became convulsed with fury. He was talking excitedly now to both constables at once, indicating Marner with his chin, as his hands were held. But the men paid no attention. They had orders to arrest him and they had arrested him. What he was saying, trying to explain, they did not even listen to.

Marner watched him with a serious face, with the expression of one deeply interested, as indeed he was. He showed no sign of recognition, and when his friends asked him if he knew who the man was who had been arrested, and how it was the man seemed to recognise him, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a man named Milo, a defaulting solicitor," he said carelessly. "I knew him well by sight. Lives in Exeter. He mistakes me for somebody he knows, I guess. Come along, boys, I have everything ready. We'll go first to the Shelbourne, as usual."

Yet inwardly he was chuckling. He had put two and two together and knew quite well why Milo had been arrested. It was due to his having misappropriated funds belonging to his clients. He had heard the rumours that Milo's firm had done something crooked, and that trouble was in store in consequence. He knew that the forged bills had not been met when Mosse and Evelsbury had pressed for payment. And he had been told by a friend, well posted in all that was happening in London, that Milo had "crashed," as he put it, in a mad plunge on turf speculation on the tape. Marner felt very virtuous just then. He saw the hand of Justice stretched forth to seize an evil-doer and see justice done. It never occurred to him to reflect that

Justice might have been equally well employed in stretching out a hand to grasp him too.

So that was the end of Milo, he reflected. In due course he would no doubt be tried, convicted and sentenced. George Ashcombe was dead, and so was Joe Soper. Now Milo's claws were cut. Really his luck seemed never to forsake him. The man who had shot at him that afternoon during Kingston Regatta, "with intent to kill," was still at large, but Marner felt confident he knew who that man was, and almost as confident that soon he would lay him by the heels, too. Who was there left, of the old crowd, who could do him harm? The old sealer, Watkins?

He smiled at the thought of that old derelict's being able to work much mischief. True, he had made away with Soper, and done it very cleverly, but he had been well paid. Who else would pay him as generously? He remembered Watkins' veiled threat when he had told him he knew what had happened on Kingston Bridge that night.

But now that Milo, whose tool he would first have to become before attempting to carry out that threat, was safely put away, what had he to fear from Watkins?

The four men were in great spirits as they scrambled off their jaunting cars in Stephen's Green. They were talking loudly and laughing boisterously in the vestibule of the Shelbourne, when the page handed Marner a telegram.

It ran as follows: "Important developments. Return at once.—Yvonne."

CHAPTER XXX

THE KNOTS AGAIN

CHRISTMAS was approaching. Charles P. Jamieson having been cabled for from America to attend a meeting of one of his companies, Mrs. Jamieson and her companion had accepted an invitation from Mrs. Monckton to spend Christmas with her at Shadcombe.

"We shall have quite a cheery house-party," she wrote, "and it needs only your presence to make it the complete success I hope it will be. Most of the people you met in Shadcombe in the autumn are here now, including Mr. Marner and Gerald Grey, Bobbie Tollhurst, the Ashcombes, Miss Yvonne—Madame as she called herself—and Irene Baxter. The man you did not, if I remember aright, care much about, Octavius Milo, will of course not be here. You no doubt read the newspapers, so I need not explain why."

"Mr. Marner and Miss Yvonne still remain upon the brink of being married, but seem nervous about taking the plunge. Oh, and another mutual friend is here, though not staying with me—Mrs. Jacob Mulhall. She is the woman you used to say 'flew off the handle' whenever she got the chance, if you remember. I know you will love to meet her again. Or won't you?"

"Vera Trevor sends her love and says she will cry her eyes out if you don't come. I shall not cry my eyes out, it is so unbecoming, but I shall be most horribly disappointed. So you will come—won't you?"

Tolhurst had of late become facetious at the expense of what he called Shadcombe's Modern Society. "The wonderful clever gentleman, this illustrious author," as a local newspaper reporter had once called him, was also wont from time to time to speak mockingly of the New Residents—he was an excellent epigrammatist—but whereas his ridicule not infrequently had a touch of malice thinly veiled, Tolhurst's jibes were always without sting.

And certainly the New Residents afforded scope for satire. It was amusing to think, as Tolhurst used to say, that in a little town which had for years been considered almost upon a par with Bournemouth as a centre of ultra-respectability, should all at once have taken to its social bosom a man admittedly a reformed adventurer; a woman who had danced in most European and American towns, a lawyer whose ambition had landed him unexpectedly in gaol; and a lady with a mysterious daughter and a more mysterious past, whom some believed a widow, and an individual of paradoxical character.

"Bobbie might have added," the "illustrious author" observed when Bobbie himself had left the club one day after talking thus, "only of course we know why he didn't, that equally amusing is the fact of a representative of Baxter's Agency being received by Shadcombe's alleged best people with open arms. Talk about the lion lying down with the wolf—or was it a lamb?—here we have wheat and tares growing in the same vineyard in perfect harmony. The whole thing is *baroque*, like one of the topsy-turvy situations in a Gilbertian opera."

The retired Colonel had been chewing the end of his moustache in silence. Now he cut in suddenly.

"I can't follow your epigrams and mixed metaphors and things," he said almost truculently; "but I should like just to know what you mean by 'a vineyard' in reference to what you have been saying. What was this vineyard you spoke of?"

"We speak in parables, Colonel," he answered, an old member and resident of Shadcombe. "The vineyard —call it, if this place, Shadcombe. The wheat and the tares are respectively the good people and the bad among the New Residents or, as Bobbie calls them, 'Shadcombe's Modern Society.' Among the former, I suppose we should include Miss Baxter, who, like all good detectives, is trying, in the sole interests of morality, of course, to bring wrongdoers to justice, while the tares are the bad people—no, discretion compels me to withhold their names; but no doubt you have acumen enough to guess them, Colonel. I know Tolhurst has."

"There is one person we seem all to have forgotten in this little colloquy," Tolhurst said, ignoring the reference to himself, "and that is our Jeffries. It would seem as though into all grades of society in this townlet at present, corrupt people have forced an entrance. Or possibly the infection is contagious. Only yesterday Mrs. Ashcombe's chauffeur, Tom, spread himself at some length on the subject of—well, the gentleman I am speaking of. Tom isn't loquacious as a rule, quite the contrary, but he talked very openly to me while I sat beside him on the car. He declared he knew all along—well, that that gentleman would hang himself one day if given rope enough."

"It is always safe to say that sort of thing of a man when he is down," the Colonel observed, jerking his chin up suddenly, a little trick he had. "Until Jeffries

got himself into trouble, nobody ever thought ill of him, not even the Ashcombes' chauffeur, I feel convinced of that. By the way," he went on, addressing the little group," have you heard that Mrs. Willie has engaged the cook from Torquay whom Mrs. Ashcombe sacked suddenly the day before her daughter came to her unfortunate end?"

"Indeed?" Tolhurst said, interested. "When did you hear that?"

"Mrs. Willie told me so herself this morning. A good cook, too, by all accounts. Mrs. Willie has asked my wife and me to dine with her on Christmas Day, and I am quite looking forward to it. But we always look forward to Mrs. Willie's entertainments, don't we? I know I do."

When everybody had concurred that Mrs. Willie's hospitality, no matter of what variety, was invariably "worth while," conversation drifted into other channels. Nothing of particular interest was spoken about, until somebody happened to inquire how soon Octavius Milo's case would be likely to come on.

"Apropos of that case," the Colonel said, when several guesses as to its probable date had been hazarded, "I am informed that Milo is likely to make some startling disclosures in Court. I heard from a reliable source that he might make statements concerning even friend Marner. Tell me," he lowered his voice, "have any of you ever heard it hinted that Marner had to do, has still to do, with certain queer transactions over in Ireland?"

He looked about him, then went on:

"They say he has had a finger in some rather nefarious contraband importations, arms and so forth."

"For whom?"

It was Tolhurst who had put the question.

"It's the Irish Patriots he is supposed to be helping—at least so my informant had it," the Colonel replied seriously.

Tolhurst and the others glanced at each other significantly. The Colonel saw the glance.

"Ah, so you too have heard something," he exclaimed. "Don't you think it singular?"

But neither Tolhurst nor anyone else answered. The Colonel was a dear old man, as every one admitted, but his tongue upon occasions ran too freely.

Meanwhile Grey and Irene Baxter were more hopelessly than ever in love with each other. When not alone, they tried to hide their feelings, but their attempts were unsuccessful. It was at a ball at Mrs. Monckton's, just before Christmas, that Irene was again overcome by one of her sudden and irresponsible paroxysms of affection.

Flanking Mrs. Willie's house, and facing south, was a long, wide conservatory, redolent of exotics, which for some years Mrs. Willie had made a hobby of cultivating. Among these beautiful flowers was one, the perfume of which, Mrs. Willie sometimes laughingly told her friends, was "supposed to act as a love charm." Found only in New Guinea, the specimens of it which she possessed had been brought home and given to her by a great friend, who formerly had been a tea-planter in Assam, and had afterwards visited New Guinea. He had told her that the natives of that island, a superstitious race, largely addicted to witchcraft, regarded the blossom as a love potion.

"It has a most singular scent, I must say," Mrs. Willie had remarked to Grey one day; "but there, you

will be able to judge for yourself on the night of my ball, for I am having the conservatory laid-out according to a design entirely my own, which I fancy will appeal to a young man of your susceptible temperament.

"No, I won't tell you what it will be like," she added ambiguously, as Grey tried to worm something definite out of her. "All I will say is that Fair Rosamund's bower will fade into insignificance by comparison."

And on the night of the ball he found that his hostess had spoken only the truth. The great conservatory had been transformed by means of closely-set garlands and festoons of exotics, and artificial elusions of shrubs and evergreens, into a kind of floral maze in which were cunningly concealed nooks, cosy corners and little arbours, the whole dimly lit by half-hidden shaded lights, so that the place had come to resemble a sort of fairy-land. To add to its allurement, the strains of a band could be heard quite faintly, as though a long, long way off. What struck everybody most, however, upon their first entering this enchanted garden, was the delicious and most peculiar perfume exhaled apparently by one of the exotics.

"I wonder which the flower is that has such an extraordinary scent," Grey said when he had been seated for some minutes beside his partner in a moss-lined alcove then almost in obscurity. "It is the strangest perfume I have ever known. Do you know its name?"

To his surprise Irene did not answer. He turned to look at her, and could just make out her profile in the half-light. They sat, half-reclining on a sort of divan, so soft and comfortable that, as Grey had remarked

a moment before, he felt he would like to stay there all night.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Why not stay here, as you suggest?" she said in a low voice. "I feel—oh, I cannot tell you how I feel, alone here with you like this, my own darling. Yes, I have noticed the perfume too. It makes me feel so strange. What was it Mrs. Willie said to you about it?"

He told her.

"A 'love potion'?" she almost whispered. "Ah, yes, I can believe it being that. At least I feel to-night as I have never felt before."

He thought he heard her sigh.

"I know what you are thinking," she went on, speaking quickly. "You are thinking that if I am stranger to-night than you have ever known me, I must be strange indeed. Isn't that so? Come nearer to me, darling."

As on previous occasions, he seemed suddenly to become conscious of her hypnotic personality, or whatever the odd power might be which she possessed. He did as she had asked, and the attraction at once increased. In the half-light her eyes, fixed upon him, seemed to shine. Suddenly she put her arm out and drew him to her.

Her hand slid down his arm, and clutched his fingers tightly.

"Oh, Gerald!" she all at once exclaimed, "I have never loved you as I do to-night, Gerald, my own, own darling. Come to me dear—come."

A strange spell seemed to steal over his senses. Could it be the spell of the love plant that Mrs. Willie had told him of, he wondered vaguely? His brain, too,

seemed obsessed by some power he could not understand and that he had never felt before.

For a long time they stayed so, knowing that none could see or hear, none disturb their ecstasy. They would marry soon, very, very soon, he murmured again and again. There had been reasons for delay, they existed no longer now. To-morrow everything should be settled.

The ball was well advanced when they at last emerged. Here and there in the enchanted garden couples roamed aimlessly.

"I wonder," Grey said suddenly, "if we can find that flower that comes from New Guinea," and he went on to describe it as Mrs. Monckton had described it to him. At that moment they heard Mrs. Jamieson's voice close by.

"Isn't it just too cute?" she was saying, and then her partner laughed.

"And it makes you fall in love," he answered with a snigger.

When they had passed on out of sight, Irene caught Grey's sleeve.

"That must be it," she exclaimed quite excitedly. "Let us come and look at it."

They examined it closely for a little while, and pronounced it disappointing. Suddenly Irene said:

"Look, Gerald, how queerly it is tied. It looks as though"

She stopped abruptly.

"Gerald."

Almost as she spoke he saw what she had noticed. Bending down, he scrutinised the knots. Then their eyes met.

"This plant, you know, comes from New Guinea," he

said in a peculiar tone. "The knots were tied there—no doubt actually by natives."

"Natives! Did natives tie up those festoons, do you suppose?" she pointed as she spoke. "And the cord connecting those garlands, look at the knots in it."

For some moments they were silent.

"Gerald," she asked in a suddenly lowered voice, "who arranged the place, who put up these festoons?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you know that the cook dismissed by Mrs. Ashcombe last February, and who has gossiped so much about the crime, now has a situation here as cook?"

CHAPTER XXXI

MORE ABOUT THE ASHCOMBES

At last the locality in which Mrs. Ashcombe, Ella and Polly had lived for some years before coming to Shadcombe, had been discovered.

The discovery was made quite accidentally by Bobbie Tolhurst. He had gone to Middleham, in Yorkshire, to make arrangements with a trainer of racehorses there to take over some thoroughbreds belonging to a friend of his then abroad, and in course of conversation, one evening, the trainer said to him:

“By the way, you know Shadcombe. I wonder if you have ever come across, or heard of, a certain Mrs. Ashcombe who went to live there a year or two ago?”

Tolhurst squinted down at the cigarette he was smoking, a trick of his if he was suddenly asked some unexpected question. After a moment’s pause, he answered:

“Why, yes, I have heard of her. In fact I have met her. Why?”

“Oh, for no reason in particular. One of her daughters was strangled, you may remember, a dreadful affair. Was the murderer never discovered?”

“Never. And I suppose he never will be, now. Did you know Mrs. Ashcombe?”

“Quite well. She had a house near here, just beyond Spennymoor. Her two daughters—at least they were

supposed to be her daughters—were fine horsewomen, especially the one who is dead. They could ride anything. Used to hunt with the Bedale, and sometimes with the York and Ainsty. I bought some horses for them once. The two girls were wonderfully alike, if you remember. Is Polly with her mother now?"

"Yes. They have been in Shadcombe a good while. They had a cottage outside the town, but it was burnt down. Has she been a widow long?"

Tolhurst spoke as though the history of the Ashcombes interested him only indirectly.

"Strange your asking that question," the trainer replied. "There is a queer story attached to that. Mrs. Ashcombe and her daughters lived here about three years. During the first year she called herself by another name. Then suddenly she took the name of Ashcombe, and it was commonly supposed that for some reason she had changed her name. But in fact, 'Ashcombe' is her true name, I believe. It is generally known about here that her husband served a term in gaol, five years they say it was, I fancy for larceny. When he came out of prison he deserted her and disappeared, and it was said that soon afterwards he died in an asylum somewhere in America; that would have been some years ago. Some say, however, that he never died at all, and that Mrs. Ashcombe is not really a widow. She was supposed to be well off—money of her own, you know. Her husband was formerly in the Merchant Service, they say; but that may not be true. All sorts of stories used to be told about him."

"Why did she leave here?"

"Found the air too bleak, she said. She went to live in Devonshire because she wanted a warm climate. Also she thought, so I remember her telling me, that

the climate down there would suit Ella better. Ella was never what you would call robust."

"I suppose you never saw her husband?"

"Never. But there was a tall, good-looking fellow, I remember, who used to come and see her here, stayed with her sometimes for a month or more on end. People used to talk. Of course they would, under the circumstances."

He smiled significantly.

"I can't remember his name," he went on, frowning as he endeavoured to rack his memory. "Remember me to Mrs. Ashcombe when you see her, will you? She used to be quite handsome, and I suppose is still. Ella and Polly were equally pretty, nice, bright girls, too."

On his return to Shadcombe, Tolhurst imparted this information to Irene Baxter and Gerald Grey.

"We have made a discovery, too, while you have been away," Irene said. "We have found the famous bundle, with the letters, etc., in it. At least it was Yvonne who put us on the track. Some one must, of course, have given her a hint; in fact she admits as much, but won't say who it was. She is odd, in some ways, so unnecessarily secretive. We are great friends, yet I feel that I am not really in her confidence, though she tells me a good deal. I can fathom most of my sex, but, frankly, I can't fathom Yvonne."

"And where did you find the bundle?"

"Why, in that cave on Haldon. Down in the dark corner of the cave, if you remember, there is a sort of recess, difficult to get at. The bundle was hidden away in there, and the opening covered by a flat stone the colour of the soil, so that we never noticed it."

"Have you the bundle now?"

"Yes, at my rooms, locked up in my trunk. And

what do you think I all along suspected—I know I have told you this—that the bit of broken tallow candle I found among the rubbish in the garden at Gareth Cottage might prove to have been part of the candle found in the bundle. Well, it was. The two bits fit exactly.”

“Come, scent is improving! Have you any other news?”

“Only that Mrs. Monckton’s cook, who was formerly the Ashcombes’ cook, can tie those peculiar knots. I laid a little plot, with Mrs. Willie’s consent, and got her cook to tie up rather an awkwardly shaped parcel for me. She tied it at once with those very knots—sort of slip-knots, but different from any other slip-knots I have ever seen. I got her on the subject of the murder, too, and she seemed quite pleased to talk about it. She as good as said she was sure that Mrs. Ashcombe’s husband did it. That is one up to you, Bobbie. Still, for my part, I continue to maintain that at the time of the murder Ashcombe was dead. I practically have proofs of that, as I told you some time ago.”

“‘Practically’ having proofs isn’t the same as actually possessing proofs,” Tolhurst answered. “I have just told you that my friend at Spennymoor said some people there declared that Ashcombe had not died, that he was *still alive*.¹”

“Well, even supposing, for the sake of argument, that he is still alive, what would he be doing here in Shadcombe?”

“I happened to ask Mrs. Willie’s cook that very question, just as the Ashcombes’ chauffeur, Tom, came into the room,—he had come over with a message for Mrs. Willie from Mrs. Ashcombe. He heard me ask,

and inquired, half apologetically, if he might be allowed to say a word. To cut a long story short, he hinted that he too believed that Ashcombe had committed the crime, and not only that crime, but that he was also the man who fired at and wounded Mr. Marner, which I maintain is absurd. His idea about Ella's death was that Ashcombe got into Gareth Cottage with the intention of murdering both his wife and his daughter; Mrs. Ashcombe, on account of her association with some man—probably the man the trainer spoke to you about—who probably was the person who telegraphed to Mrs. Ashcombe to come to him when he was staying in Exeter, or in that village near Exeter. Kenton, isn't it called?"

"Yes. And what did Tom say about Ella?"

"Tom's theory—a far-fetched one, I call it—is that Ashcombe believed that Ella—who, Tom declares, is not Ashcombe's child—was Polly. Of course, supposing Tom to be right, Ashcombe could not have meant to kill his own daughter—unless he was quite insane."

Tolhurst thought for some moments in silence. Then he said:

"I can't understand, in the face of all this, your still believing Ashcombe to be dead. I feel quite sure, now, that he must have been the murderer."

"But where can he have come from?" Grey asked.

"Really, I can't see that that matters in the least," Tolhurst answered. "The fact remains that he was here, in, or near, Shadcombe."

"You mean that that is your opinion."

"And apparently the cook's as well as Tom's."

"They told me," Irene went on, "they never dared, before, say whom they suspected, as of course they had, and have, no actual evidence to go upon."

"Certainly Mrs. Ashcombe's behaviour," Tolhurst cut in, "and a dozen little incidents, have all pointed to her knowing who committed the crime. Now it is reasonable to suppose that she knew for a fact it was her husband, and that she dreaded that suspicion might rest upon him. She may be very fond of him still, for all we know. My dear Miss Baxter, I consider the mystery solved. But now what has the cook's tying those peculiar knots got to do with anything? Whom do you suppose showed her how to tie them?"

"Ah, that I can't say yet."

"You don't think that the cook herself, or Tom, had any hand in the crime?"

"Oh, of course not. How ridiculous! I do admit that for a few moments on the night of Mrs. Willie's ball, when I noticed how the knots in the cord were tied which held up some of the festoons in the conservatory, I thought it odd that such knots should have been used, and that I concluded—wrongly, as I have since discovered—that they had been tied by the cook herself. Nobody seems to know by whom they actually were tied—I sounded Mrs. Willie on the subject. So many people helped to fasten up the garlands and festoons, she said, that it would be impossible to say for certain who actually tied up any particular festoon."

"And what about the letters in the bundle? What was in those letters? Whom were they from and to whom were they addressed?"

Irene did not answer. Instead, she looked hard at Grey.

"I wrote those letters, Bobbie," he answered in a strained voice, after some moment's pause. "I was a beast to write them. They are letters I wrote to poor little Ella when I was feeling mad with jealousy—I

foolishly fancied she was growing fond of Milo. I wrote harshly, threateningly. The police read the letters when they found them in the bundle—and—well, you know how unimaginative the police are. The only inference they could draw was that I really meant to do poor Ella some bodily harm. What I can't make out is why the unknown criminal took them away, and, having taken them, why he left the bundle where it was afterwards found. It is odd, too, that he should also have taken a portrait of Ella. There was one found in the bundle; it is there still."

Tolhurst pondered awhile.

"It looks very much as though," he said at last, "the murderer meant that suspicion should be cast on you, Grey. Of course the bit of candle he probably put into the bundle in order that it should not be found, when it might have been used as a clue, especially if it had his finger-prints upon it."

"There are no finger-prints upon it," Irene said.

They went on talking for a long time; there was so much of interest they had to tell each other, and to discuss. Really it seemed now as though, after all these months, the actual murderer of Ella Ashcombe was about to be discovered. Tolhurst mentioned that his trainer friend could not account for Mrs. Ashcombe's having apparently wished to conceal Polly's existence for a time. At Spennymoor, he said, both girls had lived with her. Nor could he say where Polly had been during the years Mrs. Ashcombe had lived at Gareth Cottage—until Mrs. Ashcombe had returned to Devonshire accompanied by Polly some time after Ella's death, to the surprise of everybody.

But a fortnight passed, then another week, and nothing happened. Jeffries and Milo remained under

arrest on their respective charges, yet neither was brought up. What could the delay be due to? Were private forces at work, secret wires being pulled, to delay, or prevent justice being done?

That was what everybody wanted to know.

It was now February again, nearly a year since the Holcombe tragedy had occurred. Soon it was rumoured that important evidence either was to be, or had been, put in by Tom, the Ashcombes' chauffeur, and that his statements would be borne out by the woman who had at one time been Mrs. Ashcombe's cook.

Naturally, therefore, everybody turned for information to Mrs. Monckton; but, if she possessed any, she kept it to herself. This annoyed Mrs. Jacob Mulhall exceedingly. Deep down in her heart she disliked Mrs. Willie, was jealous of her popularity, possibly also of her beauty, her charm of manner and her general attractiveness, but she had intelligence enough not to betray what her heart concealed. She found satisfaction, however, in writing in her petty way that Mrs. Willie was not a woman to be wholly trusted.

"Dear Mrs. Willie," she would say, "one can't help being drawn to her; and yet sometimes I wonder whether she is a woman in whom one ought to place implicit confidence. Those very handsome women—most people seem to think her handsome, though I don't wholly agree with them—so often have some ulterior motive in what might appear to casual acquaintances to be merely being agreeable, I sometimes wonder"

Then she would stop abruptly, to allow her listeners to form their own conclusions. For some there were, as she knew, who would be "catty" enough intentionally to place a wrong construction upon what she insinuated she had "sometimes wondered."

'At last, one morning, it became definitely known that both Jeffries and Milo were going to make some very sensational disclosures when finally brought into court. The exact nature of these disclosures nobody ventured to say, because nobody actually knew, though it was generally assumed that they would have some important bearing upon the Holcombe tragedy ; also, it was said, upon the shooting of Wal Marner. Some went so far as to declare that Marner himself was to be pilloried. Tom, however, who seemed to know a good deal, was not of this opinion. He held the view that the name of the actual murderer in both cases was to be brought to light, but that Marner would have nothing to do with the case. And, though he did not actually say so, people who heard him talk came away with the idea that Mrs. Ashcombe's husband must, in some way or other, have played a very important part in both crimes.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE KNOTS UNTIED

"I HEAR that Milo and Jeffries are both going to turn King's Evidence at their trials."

It was Marner who spoke.

"What is meant by that, exactly?" Yvonne asked, looking up from the paper she was reading—they were breakfasting together one morning. "Before you go on—I see the announcement in this paper of Gerald Grey and Irene Baxter's engagement. I wonder if they will be happy?"

"Why shouldn't they be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Now tell me about this—what do you call it again?"

"King's Evidence. It means, really, betraying your friends to save your own skin; the sort of thing a man of Milo's type would do. I am surprised, though, at Jeffries doing that. At least I should be if I didn't know he had been blackmailed by George Ashecombe."

"Are you sure he was?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. And that rascal, Watkins, swore to me that Ashecombe was dead."

"He may have thought or heard he was."

Marner gave a great laugh.

"Yvonne," he said, "though you are so clever in many ways, in some ways—you will forgive my saying so—you are positively stupid. Men like Watkins never

'think' or 'hear' things. They either know things or they don't know them. You follow me?"

"I think so."

She paused. Then she asked quickly:

"They won't say things they know about you, will they?"

"They can. And they may. But it don't matter to me two buttons if they do. They can't prove anything, anything at all."

Excitement grew intense as the day approached when the two well-known local residents would appear for cross-examination. Both were men of whom all kinds of stories had for a long time been floating about; and both were now known to have had some sort of mysterious past. It was said that both had been soldiers of fortune. This certainly was true of Jeffries, and up to a point it was true of Milo too.

Nor was interest in the case merely local. Throughout the whole of the West Country, from Taunton down to Plymouth, and even further, and from Torquay and Shadcombe up to Bideford and Barnstaple, the affair was discussed. It seemed more than likely, now, from what was said, that information would be forthcoming which would at last lead to the murderers of Ella Ashcombe and of Marner's chauffeur being identified.

Milo's case was the first to come on for hearing. Milo looked worn and haggard, as he stood facing his cross-examiner, and years older than he had done only a few months before.

His statements, however, proved disappointing. They were mild and unconvincing, and, as he had no evidence to advance, they carried little weight. His allegations against Marner, who sat calmly listening

and looking on, seemed so far-fetched, that on one or two occasions they evoked derisive laughter.

Briefly what he said was this: He declared that since he had first met Marner—that had been in America, some years before—everything had gone amiss with him. Marner had advised him to do this, had egged him on to do that, and apparently, according to his own showing, had led him just as if he had no will whatever of his own. Yet, as Counsel for the Crown observed, defendant had not the appearance of being week-kneed and invertebrate, “a creature who would respond to any bell-wether.” Nor, as he further remarked, did the defendant’s career up to the time of his arrest justify their supposing him to be deficient in brains or in ability; on the contrary, he had always appeared to have been generously endowed with both.

“Moreover,” he went on, “nobody has ever, I make bold to assert, heard one word uttered which might tend to impugn the character of the gentleman whose name defendant has used so freely.”

There were titters at the back of the Court, when this was said, but apparently nobody noticed them.

“The accused,” counsel continued, warming to his work, “would have us believe that a very respectable citizen, whose only crime it is that he has amassed a vast fortune through years of hard work and determination, coupled with exceptional ability (laughter), was actually foolish enough to forge his, accused’s, signature in order to secure a paltry twelve thousand pounds! Gentlemen, I ask you, could any declaration be more grotesque? For the moment it makes one almost question the defendant’s sanity. If the handwriting, and the signature in these letters, sent to the money-lenders from America, with reference to this

loan transaction, were forgeries—and I do not dispute that may not have been—who else can have written them but accused himself? Whose interest, but accused's, would it be to write them? Here we have a man who has not hesitated to embezzle vast sums of money belonging to his clients in order to indulge his passion for reckless turf speculation, calmly asking us to believe that a very rich man, in no need of money, borrowed a paltry twelve thousand pounds from a firm of usurers, and went so far as to forge his, accused's, name, because, we must presume, he could not find anybody else to stand security for him. Gentlemen, the whole thing reads like a boy's story, or like a tale of fiction written by a man lacking sense of perspective. Accused's assertions are, in my opinion, nothing more or less than a series of trumped-up charges devoid even of any likeness of what the French call *vraisemblance*."

The case was altogether disappointing, from the point of view of the public. Milo was found guilty of misappropriating moneys belonging to his clients, and sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

When Jeffries' case came on for hearing, the Court was packed. Great surprises were expected, as an Irishman present put it, and these surprises came in full measure.

Jeffries looked very calm, far calmer than he had been at Ella Ashcombe's inquest or during Grey's trial. When asked if he meant to turn King's Evidence with reference to an important matter with a view to exonerating himself to some extent, as he was said to have expressed the intention of doing, he replied that he did.

"Under the circumstances," he said, after preliminary questions had been put to him, "I had better go back twenty or more years, and start at the period

when I first became acquainted with several persons whose names will be familiar to you.

"At that time I was in America—in New Orleans, to be precise—living chiefly by my wits. I had come out from England about two years before, and failed to make good in any honest employment I had undertaken. It was then I became acquainted with a little group of men, Britishers like myself, who appeared to be amassing fortunes quickly. They seemed to take to me, somehow, and soon afterwards they made me a proposal—which I accepted.

"They owned between them, I then discovered, what I can only describe as a contraband tramp steamer. They cruised in various seas and never for long round any one coast or to any one country, and they made their plans and handled their trade so cleverly that they went on for eleven years—possibly longer—with-out being caught. I was with them nine years, and during that time we traded with I don't know how many countries. I know that we went often to New Guinea, landing there chiefly cargoes of spirits which we bartered to the natives in exchange largely for pearls. New Guinea was, I may say, one of our most profitable countries."

"I have heard something already about that boat," counsel interrupted. "May I ask if she was not owned by a man named Marner?"

"She was, William Marner."

A little flutter of excitement went through the court.

"William Marner." Counsel repeated the name thoughtfully. "There is a Mr. Walter Marner living in Shadcombe at the present time. He is in court now."

He paused.

"Is Mr. Walter Marner who lives in Shadcombe, and

with whom I believe you are acquainted, the individual who was master of the contraband tramp ship you speak of?"

Jeffries bent slightly forward, as though he had not heard aright.

"Will you repeat that question, please?" he asked.
Counsel repeated it.

For the first time since he had entered the box, Jeffries laughed. Indeed, in spite of what was happening, he seemed to have difficulty in controlling his mirth.

"Is Mr. Wal Marner the man who . . . are you speaking seriously?"

"Seriously? Of course, I am speaking seriously! This is a Court of Law. Answer me at once, please!"

"Oh, with pleasure," Jeffries replied, smiling ironically. "Mr. Wal Marner who lives in Shadcombe is, I can assure you, not the gentleman who owned that boat," and he chuckled again. "I don't think I have ever seen two men of the same name quite so unlike each other."

The court seemed to give a sigh, as though of relief or of disappointment. Marner himself looked about him with a great grin on his good-natured face. He even went so far as to slap his knee with a resounding smack, as if this were the biggest joke he had ever heard uttered. Possibly it was.

"Go on with your story," counsel said.

"When finally, after nine years' successful trading in many parts of the world, it became apparent to our master, and in fact to all of us, that our enterprise could no longer be carried on with even a small degree of security, we abandoned it, and the boat was sold. After that we went inland."

"What country are you referring to now?"

"The United States. We then proceeded to embark upon many ventures, which I need not describe, following all the while our sea tactics of never staying long in any one place. Sometimes, I may say generally, we were fortunate; occasionally we were not."

"You were still the same gang, I take it?"

"As you put it like that, we were. We kept together as far as possible, perhaps because each of us knew too much about all the rest to risk independent action.

"Among the countries we had traded with whilst at sea was Newfoundland. St. John's we now and again visited and—well, I need not say more than that we floated a great company there which proved an equally great failure. We left Newfoundland in a hurry.

"From that time onward, luck seemed to forsake us. One venture after another 'went down,' and we lost thousands. We tried to recover losses by launching ventures on a bigger scale than ever, companies, gambling-houses, bogus theatrical enterprises, emigration stunts, and so forth, but we could do no good at all.

"It was then that our 'gang,' as you have called it, began to go to pieces."

"How many of you were there?"

"At sea, a round dozen. Afterwards from eight to ten. Two were washed overboard at sea. Three others died."

"Which left seven."

"Yes, seven. Among the last to hold together was a man named Ashcombe, George Ashcombe, who afterwards was arrested in England and sentenced to penal servitude."

The statement created an immense sensation in Court. Mrs. Ashcombe, fortunately, was not present.

"There was also a man, much older than the rest of us, called Joe Soper. His body, you will remember, was found floating in Shadcombe Harbour last year; he had been strangled. The man who strangled him was another of the 'gang,' an old Newfoundland sealer named Watkins, who had become one of our crowd while we were at sea. Watkins had settled in Newton Abbot afterwards. I now understand that he died there about a month ago."

All this Jeffries had related with complete composure.

"Why did Watkins kill this man, Soper?" counsel asked sharply.

"I have no idea. Some private grudge, most likely. Watkins had always been a blackguard, and was not to be trusted."

"I don't think it is for you to talk of 'blackguards,' and 'not being trusted,'" Counsel observed dryly. "Go on."

"When finally I cut adrift from what remained of the gang, I went to Iceland, to Reykjavik. I thought that there I should not meet anyone I knew, and I was not mistaken. I obtained a good position in Reykjavik, and I may say that from then onward I led a new and honest life.

"Some years later I made the acquaintance there of a gentleman who used to come out from England once or twice a year. Of course he knew nothing of my past, and we became very friendly. I had several times expressed a longing to him to return to the old country if I could find a post there that would suit me. One day he asked me if I would care to join the constabulary in Devonshire. I jumped at the idea and—but I think you know the rest. I should like, however, to emphasise my statement that this gentleman knew

nothing whatever about my past life. And now I came to what has so long been known as the Holcombe Tragedy."

He paused. The silence in court was intense. The ears of all were strained to hear the disclosures that the accused man was about to make.

"I had been promoted Chief Constable about a year," he continued in the same even, dispassionate voice, "when a lady and her daughter, with their maid, and their chauffeur, arrived in Shadcombe, and soon afterwards bought a house at Holcombe—Gareth Cottage. One day, to my amazement, I recognized the chauffeur. He had been one of our crowd in the years gone by, when we were at sea. For several months after his arrival in Shadcombe, something about him had puzzled me. I did not recognise him at once because in the old days he had worn a heavy beard and moustache, whereas then, as now, he was clean shaven, which has altered his appearance completely. No sooner did I let him know I recognised him, than he turned upon me, and declared that if ever I betrayed his secret he would at once unmask me. I knew then that he had me in his power, and that thenceforward I must tread carefully, do all I could to conciliate him.

"For the time, however, we remained apparently on friendly terms. Sometimes he hinted that he was short of money, and generally on such occasions I 'lent' him some—of course, I knew he would never return it. He had been four years in Mrs. Ashcombe's service, he told me. He also told me about a year ago that George Ashcombe, whom we had both known very intimately, had then died recently in America, but that Mrs. Ashcombe remained in ignorance of his death. Another thing I soon discovered was that he was madly in love

with his employer's daughter, Miss Ella Ashcombe. I may say, too, that the room which was revealed when Gareth Cottage was burnt down was known only to this man. Even Mrs. Ashcombe did not know of its existence. The door into it was a revolving panel which the chauffeur discovered by accident. He told me about it one night when he had had a glass too much, and, from what he said, I gathered that all in that room belonged to him.

"And then occurred the tragedy at Gareth Cottage. As soon as I heard of the murder, I guessed who had committed it. This man, Tom, had, it seemed, killed her in a fit of jealousy—I had known him in the old days many a time become almost mad through jealousy. I saw him secretly, the day but one after the crime, and taxed him with having committed it. He admitted his guilt at once, adding in a passion that if I dared breathe so much as a hint which might lead to suspicion resting upon him he would at once unmask me, which would have meant my ruin and disgrace. He even told me how he had set about the crime, how, after driving Mrs. Ashcombe out to Kenton village, near Exeter, and leaving her there with a friend who was dying, he had driven straight back to within a mile of Holcombe—it was a very dark, stormy night, if you remember—had left the car in a field, entered Gareth Cottage by the window, and strangled Miss Ashcombe while she slept.

"Then to put the police off the track, he had set the room in disorder, and finally had taken away with him some compromising letters which he knew to be in a drawer in the bedroom—he always read letters received by Miss Ashcombe and placed in that drawer, he had told me before—also a portrait or a miniature of his victim. He had some sort of idea, apparently, from

what he told me, that these letters might be made use of later to throw suspicion upon the gentleman who wrote them, and so increase his own safety. I need not mention the name of the gentleman whose letters they were. It was for this reason he made them up in the bundle, and left it where he knew it must sooner or later be found. The bit of candle found in the bundle he probably dropped into it by accident. He has since assured me that he never imagined that suspicion of having committed the crime might come to rest on George Ashcombe, which it did do."

As he paused, to glance at some notes he had written on a slip of paper, counsel asked sharply:

"But if this man, this chauffeur, was in a position to blackmail you, why could not the other men you have named, Watkins, Joe Soper, equally have blackmailed you? Say, if they had needed money?"

"Because they had no written evidence or proofs to produce, and so nobody would have believed them. This man, unfortunately, had documentary proofs. . . . I could move neither hand nor foot. Two other men whom I knew in the old days have also turned up in this neighbourhood, but there is no need for me to name them, though they had to do with the cave on Haldon where I afterwards concealed the letters. That cave was used by the four men as a meeting place, and I used sometimes to meet them there after dark. Their idea was that they could discuss certain plans with greater security there than elsewhere. They had followed that practice in Newfoundland, too. Mr. Octavius Milo also knew of the cave. I fancy he sometimes employed the two men whose names I have not mentioned, in some capacity or other. I cannot say what, as I do not know."

"But why did you hide the letters and say you had lost them? And who sent the anonymous letter the police received soon after the Holcombe tragedy, hinting very plainly that a gentleman to whom you have referred was probably guilty of the crime?"

"The chauffeur, Tom. His name is Tom Cranbourne. For some reason of his own he determined to lay the guilt on—on the gentleman you allude to. And all this time Mrs. Ashcombe, and I think others, have felt convinced that the crime was committed by George Ashcombe who, as I say, has been dead quite a while. Mrs. Ashcombe was in terror all the time lest suspicion should come to rest upon him. It is my belief that she herself fired her cottage in order to destroy any traces of her husband that existed, or which she fancied might exist."

"Such as?"

"Well, boot impressions on the floor of the room where the crime was committed, marks on the outside wall, and so forth."

"But why should the lady have thought her husband would do such a thing?"

Jeffries hesitated.

"That is a delicate question," he said, "a question I would sooner not answer. There were certain reasons, or rather there was a certain reason. Miss Polly Ashcombe and the dead girl were not sisters. Miss Polly is a niece of Mrs. Ashcombe, who, however, cared for her as though the girl was her own daughter. For some mysterious reason Ashcombe was jealous of this adopted daughter, and Mrs. Ashcombe, I fancy, thought that in a fit of madness he attacked her—as the two girls were so much alike—and killed his own daughter Ella. That was Mrs. Ashcombe's notion, I

fancy. I also charge Tom Cranbourne with the attempt on Mr. Marner's life, and the murder of his motor-driver."

Again a wave of excitement swept over the Court.

"Tom Cranbourne fostered a bitter hatred for Mr. Marner from the time that gentleman came to settle here," he went on, speaking now more rapidly. "He told me that he meant one day to 'get his own back,' though I have no idea what for. And some days after that crime he as good as told me what he had done, knowing that I dared not speak. He was always of a boastful nature, and found it hard to conceal acts he felt proud of. You may remember that a bit of string with some peculiar slip-knots was found near the spot where the shots were fired. Tom Cranbourne is one of the few men I have ever met who could tie those knots. I believe they were shown to him by some natives in New Guinea, or by some of the Newfoundland sealers, who also use them."

Such was the gist of Jeffries' confession. He explained at length how Tom Cranbourne had for months past blackmailed him with threats, and how at last, driven to desperation, having hardly any money left, he tried to obtain some from Mrs. Jamieson, whose evidence in Court was a repetition of her statements made to the newspaper reporters the day after Jeffries' arrest. One other point of interest, mentioned by Jeffries, was that one day while Cranbourne was driving him in Mrs. Ashcombe's car—it was a very foggy day in November, he said—towards the cave on Haldon, they had met Gerald Grey, Irene Baxter and Yvonne, who asked Cranbourne to drive them back to Shadcombe.

"Tom Cranbourne had become suspicious about Mr. Grey and Miss Baxter, and one or two others," Jeffries said. "He had got into his head the idea that they knew of the cave and had been to it, and he intended that day to try to find out for certain, by examining any footprints there might be in the cave, if his surmise were correct."

Not until next day was sentence upon Jeffries pronounced. Taking into consideration his frank confession, which had led at last to Ella Ashcombe's murderer being identified, also to the fact of his having been blackmailed, his sentence was a light one—one year's imprisonment.

"Isn't it extraordinary," Marner said that evening, as he walked with Yvonne along the Den, "that though retribution has overtaken my past associates, my luck in this respect has never deserted me? It was splendid of Jeffries not to betray me, seeing what he knows. I shall never forget that, and some day he will know what Wal Marner's gratitude means."

She paused before replying, then she said:

"But you will never run such risks again, will you, dear? Won't you promise me that? I know you will keep any promise you make to me."

He laughed.

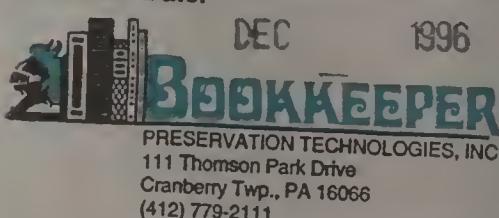
"I feel so happy this evening," he exclaimed, "that I will promise anything you like to ask me. Yes, I swear on oath to you that in future I will go straight—quite, quite straight, if only for your sake. Hark, what is that they are shouting?"

The raucous-voiced man who sold the *Evening Express and Echo* was striding along towards them at a great pace. They stopped to listen.

“Suicide of a Shadcombe resident,” was what they heard. “Mr. Tom Cranbourne found shot at Hole Head this afternoon—Evening Express—Special Edition—Evening Express. . . !”

THE END

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